

REMEMBRANCE

GREGORY O. SCOTT

For the whole bunch:

Jim, Greg B, Greg K, Troy, Karen, Tim, Mike S., Mike R.
Christie, Eileen, Sean & Shane, Kevin & Rebecca,
and all the rest.

And to Uncle George for getting the ball rolling.

Dramatis Personae

Myri “Skate” Antilles, Wraith Squadron (human female)

Allana Solo Djo, Princess of Hapes (human female)

Tenel Ka Djo, Queen of Hapes (human female)

Jagged Fel, civilian (human male)

Fy'lyor, Imperial Intelligence (Twi'lek female)

Viull “Scut” Gorsat, Wraith Squadron (Yuuzhan Vong male)

Lowbacca, Jedi Knight (Wookiee male)

Voort “Piggy” SaBinring, Wraith Squadron
(Gammorean male)

Ben Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)

Luke Skywalker, Jedi Grand Master (human male)

Jaina Solo, Jedi Master (human female)

Tahiri Veila, former Jedi Knight (human female)

Taryn Zel, Hapan guard (human female)

Zekk, Jedi Knight and Hapan guard (human male)

Prologue: Specters of the Past

Stars without number drifted through space. Against the backdrop sat a planet: rich in the greens and blues and cloud-whisps of a living world. Against the vastness of black space, it seemed small, brilliant, luminous, even with the dark patches on its southern hemisphere, scars of some past devastation. Wounded or not, it seemed like it could endure against empty eternity forever.

From the starfield, two bright lights seemed to blaze. They hung over the planet's pole like a pair of white eyes, and from those eyes nebulous gasses seemed to swirl. They circled around the bright eyes until they seemed to form a face, and soon shoulders flowed down to arms that stretched out on either side of the planet, as if to hold it tight. The arms closed around the green world and the eyes seemed to blaze, no longer pure white but the deeper red of a sick and dying star. Below the red eyes gasses and dust formed the shape of the mouth, and the mouth opened itself to speak:

“Mine.”

The living world seemed to writhe in the arms that grasped it. Its greens turned sickly brown, its rich waters black. The white whorls of cloud-vapor disappeared, scattering into the nothingness of space. The arms held it tighter and the lips turned into a cruel smile.

“Mine.”

One eye blazed red, the other tinted blue. The face seemed old and withered and twisted in an ancient and simmering anger.

“Mine.”

And then she woke up.

Jaina sat upright in bed. She looked down at the form sleeping beside her. Jag was turned away, toward the wall of the *Falcon's* cabin. She rubbed her eyes, hoping the dream would go away with waking, like dreams usually did. But this one wouldn't. She'd had the dream to many times before lately, and it never went away.

Jaina knew she wouldn't get back to sleep after that, so she got up to use the 'fresher and change out of her night clothes. The *Falcon* was still in sleep-cycle, and its halls were dark and quiet except for the distant rattle of the hyperdrives. Her parents were tucked away in their own cabin, probably sound asleep in each other's arms. It was such a comfort, knowing they would always be together.

Jaina sat down in the *Falcon's* main lounge, in the booth next to the old dejarik holo-board. She ran her fingers across its checkerboard surface, tracing the old score lines across its surface.

It had been almost a half-century since Uncle Luke had come aboard her father's ship, almost twenty since her mother sat down with Gilad Pellaeon and Elegos

A'Kla to negotiate the end to a war that had torn apart the galaxy. The *Falcon* had been a hunk of junk a half-century ago, a cobbled-together mess that kept flying through the love and devotion of her pilot. A half-century later, it was still the same. She thought it was the perfect ship for her parents, who had gone through so much, lost so much, time and time again, yet still kept flying.

It had been two years since her wedding to Jag, and they had, by most objective measures, been the best two of her life. The galaxy was still wracked by political uncertainty, Uncle Luke was still struggling to find the Jedi Order's place in things, and her poor cousin Ben was still racked with regret and heartache, but for Jaina they had been quiet and steady years. No more war and betrayal and death. Nothing except comfort, finally, after more conflict in her short life than any being deserved.

Maybe that was why the dreams were coming again. The universe didn't want to let her get too happy. The Force didn't want the Sword of the Jedi to get dull and rusty.

She couldn't tell Jag that she was dreaming. She couldn't tell anyone because she didn't know what she was seeing. She did her best to put it all behind her, pretend she didn't think about it every day. That was something she'd gotten very good at over the last four years.

She saw it sometimes, in her mother's or father's eyes, that brief moment when their thoughts would flicker back to the son who had not only been lost, but had been transformed into something so sinister and monstrous it cast a shadow over their brightest victories. But they never talked about Jacen any more.

No one did. Everyone tried to pretend like he never existed. Like the wounds he had left in their hearts weren't still bleeding.

"Hey, sweetie," she heard the soft voice of her father from the doorway. "You're up early."

She looked up to see him standing in the shadows. He reached out and flicked on a set of lights, not to daytime brightness but bright enough to let her get a good look at his face. Even in the soft light she could see the lines on his face, the heavy jowls, and the white in his hair. She didn't see her father that often lately, but every time she did she thought he looked old.

"Hi, dad," Jaina smiled. She curled up in the booth, hugging her knees to her chest. "You're up early too."

"Not so bad," he shrugged and gave his daughter that Solo grin. "How's my girl doing?"

"Not so bad," she echoed, and returned the lopsided hereditary smile. "I just couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to wake Jag."

"How's he doing, anyway?" Han said as he walked over to the cooking unit and began to fix some coffee.

"Jag's doing good," Jaina said. "A little bored with civilian life, maybe, but good. Much better than when he had an Empire to run."

"I hear he's still keeping touch with Emperor Reige."

"He's Head of State, not Emperor, and he's a good man," Jaina said. "He just has his hands full. I think he hates Jag a little for putting him in the job in the first place."

Han shrugged, like he didn't believe any Imperial could really be all that good. "But still, Jag's not completely out of the game, is he?"

"Oh, nobody ever is, are they? The galaxy always needs us to hold it together," Jaina sighed. Her father

walked over to the booth, two cups of coffee in hand, and sat down next to her. Jaina took the steaming mug in both hands and drank slowly.

“What is this?” she looked at her father. “It’s pretty... strong.”

Han chuckled. “Chadian Latte. I’ve been... experimenting lately.”

“What, are you turning into a cook now?”

Her father looked a little sheepish. “Well, you know, we’ve got some spare time lately. So your mother and I, we’ve been trying a little, you know, um, cooking courses.”

“Cooking courses?” Jaina cocked an eyebrow.

“Well, you can download stuff off the HoloNet. There’s this really good Ortolan cook, and he’s got this great instructional videos that we’ve-” Han stopped, shook his head, and laughed at himself. “Yeah, cooking courses, would you believe it? I think I’m more into it than your mother, actually.”

“It’s nice,” Jaina sipped the latte. She was getting used to it already. “Sounds like something a normal married couple should do when they’re not racing around the galaxy trying to save everybody all the time.”

“Yeah, that’s us now, a normal married couple.” Han tapped his mug against his daughter’s. “Turns out it’s not so bad, is it?”

“Probably not,” Jaina smirked.

Han took a long drink and said, “First you and Jag, now Zekk and Taryn. Seems like everybody’s getting settled nowadays.”

“We’re all grown up,” Jaina looked down at her mug.

“Don’t say that, I feel old enough already,” Han slumped in his seat and stared into his own. After a

short pause, he said, "Shame Ben and Tahiri couldn't make the wedding."

"Important mission for Uncle Luke," Jaina shrugged. "Couldn't be helped."

"You don't think it's about Vest?"

Jaina held up a hand. "I don't know and I don't want to know. Uncle Luke is playing things close to his chest lately, and honestly, that's fine with me."

"Fair enough," Han said. "Well, I'm sure they'll be all right."

Jaina nodded. "I'm sure."

They sat there for a while in the dim light, drinking their coffee in silence. Eventually her father said, "Well, I'm gonna check the cockpit. We should be coming up on Hapes in a couple hours, I want to make sure everything's still set."

"Go ahead," Jaina said, and watched him as he rose to his feet. "Thanks for the coffee, dad."

"Anytime, darling," he winked at her and staggered off.

Jaina sat there for a while longer, curled up in the booth, drinking her dad's coffee. Eventually she got up and walked back to her cabin to kick her husband out of bed.

The star system had no name. Some alpha-numeric designation, probably, the kind only known to a handful of interstellar cartographers. But no proper name. It seemed wrong to die in a star system without a name, on a mission the rest of the galaxy didn't know about, but as his X-wing slipped out of the hangar and into open space, Chell Radek was prepared to do just that.

Thankfully, he was far from alone in this. An entire squadron of X-wing fighters fanned out across *Sunbeam's* bow, then vectored toward the ghostly blue-white gas giant looming ahead of them. Fighter squads were taking off from the other ships too: newer E-wings from *Phoenix*, old K-wings from *Revolutionary*, even older BTL-A4 Y-wings from *Lacentra*. It seemed like they had dug up every fossil in the galaxy for this mission.

Radek included of course. He'd been a pretty good snubfighter pilot once, a long time ago. He knew his reflexes would have slowed with age, but he was about to find out just how much.

"Red Squadron, this is Red One," his squad leader's voice crackled over his headset. It had been over a decade since he'd heard that staticky sound. It brought back a lot of memories, many of them bad. "Red Squad, lock S-foils in attack position."

Radek found the switch. He felt their muted groan as his S-foils shifted and his laser cannons automatically began charging.

"I don't see them," said Harvet Kang, the old Gran pilot.

"I don't either," piped Teve Devroolan, a younger Rodian.

"Cut the chatter, Two and Six," Red One said. One was a human, like Radek, but unlike Radek, Doveranti had stayed in the Alliance military for ten years after the Yuuzhan Vong War ended, only to desert his post when Jacen Solo ordered him to fire on Kashyyyk.

Radek was glad to have sat out the last war. The one before it had been bad enough. His entire family had died in the Fall of Coruscant, while he was flying evac shuttles for anonymous civilians. He'd never been able

to get rid of that guilt. At least now, hopefully, he would put his old ghosts to rest. Or they would put *him* to rest, which meant about the same thing in the end.

“Red Squad, this is *Sunbeam*,” a voice from their base ship said. It was brittle and female, and probably belonged to her captain, Terra Vatrim. Another old war-horse.

“Our sensors are picking up targets at point oh-five-niner-gee.”

“Copy, adjusting course,” Red One said. “All ships, on my lead.”

Radek clicked an affirmative over his comlink and followed the four red flares of Doveranti's X-wing. They said the targets were in orbit over the gas giant, but like Kang and Devroolan, he couldn't see anything silhouetted against its pale body.

“I'm still not seeing anything on scanners,” muttered Do'varet, a Twi'lek who'd actually fought *against* Jacen Solo. This mission had made all sorts of interesting bedfellows.

“Me neither,” Kang said. “Are we *sure* the recon flight got it right? This wouldn't be our first time jumping at shadows.”

Before yet more pilots could complain, another voice came on: female, older, but firmer than Vatrim's. “All flights, this is *Phoenix*. Recon flights detect targets inside the second moon.”

Radek checked his scanners again. The gas giant's second moon seemed to be mostly ice around a small iron core.

“All three Bothan ships are moving ahead to fire on the moon's surface,” the voice continued. “Protect them while we flush out the prey.”

There was no need to confirm an order from the flagship. All the squadrons, Red included, slowed their engines to allow the three Bothan Assault Cruisers to catch up. Their long, narrow, compact bodies were moving head-first toward the moon and Red Squad settled on the right flank of a cruiser called *Fey'lya's Revenge*. What it had been called originally he didn't know, but he figured it was a good rechristening, appropriate for its new purpose.

Radek hadn't been a fan of Fey'lya during the war, but he'd been piloting his evac shuttle over Galactic City when the Chief of State's death bomb had blossomed like a beautiful, deadly flower over the old Imperial Palace. It hadn't changed his opinion about the Bothan's botching of the invasion, but he had to admire the way he went out. Out of all the memories from that horrible day, Fey'lya's brilliant fireball stayed with him the most.

Radek only hoped he would take a fraction as many Vong with him.

He was judged out of his reverie by a transmission from *Fey'lya*. Captain Saiv'tu said, "All flights, red alert. Enemy ships escaping the moon. Shuttles and small fighters."

"I see them!" Kan squawked. "Whole bunch of skips, coming out of the north pole."

"Must've been hiding in the ice," Do'varet muttered. "I heard they used that trick... Where was it?"

"Helska 4," Radek supplied.

"Cut the chatter!" Red One shouted. "It's time to act like soldiers! Stay in assigned flights. Targets are coming in fast. Get ready."

Radek licked his dry lips eagerly and brought the heads-up-display online. Red holographic highlights

traced the swarms of Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers flying right toward them.

Then they started spraying their fiery projectiles across space. The advance starfighter squads broke into a scramble. Radek tried hard to stay on the juking, jerking tail of his flight leader, the Tunroth Sovel Greepth. Coralskippers rushed past them in a dark blur. There was a flash of light on his port side, and a burst of static over his comm.

“We lost Eight!” Devroolan said.

“Six, Seven, hold close on me,” Greepth said as he pulled his X-wing into a steep climb.

The force of velocity pushed Radek against the back of his cockpit. He hadn't flown combat in fifteen years. He'd gotten older, fatter, softer, slower, and he'd forgotten just how nimble and deadly the Vong could be.

Even though they haunted his nightmares, he'd forgotten.

The three X-wings snapped into a roll to avoid another swam of skippers. Greepth pointed his nose toward *Fey'lya's* pale hull, and the others followed. They skirted above the cruiser's protective shields and gave wide birth to the ship's heavy turbolasers as they pounded the icy surface of the moon. Radek checked his scanners and saw some larger ships pulling out of their hiding place inside the moon.

“Is this all of 'em?” Devroolan asked. Apparently he'd just noticed too. “Is this the whole fleet?”

“There has to be more,” Radek muttered.

Before Greepth could reprimand them for chatter, a barrage of Yuuzhan Vong projectiles punched through *Fey'lya's* forward shields and detonated one of her turbolaser batteries. The explosion jumped up in front

of the X-wings. Greepth tried to roll out of the way and Radek tried to follow, but his reflexes were slow. He could feel the singing heat of the fireball, even inside his vacuum-sealed cockpit. The inside of his cockpit screamed alerts as his shields threatened to overflow. But the light died away and he followed Greepth's engine-flares away from the cruiser, toward the open stars.

Then he noticed that Devroolan wasn't with them.

"Where's Teve" he said. "Where's Six?"

"We lost him," Greepth said severely. "He lost an engine and smashed into the hull."

Radek felt shocked and empty. He'd taken to Devroolan the most out of anyone in the squad. The Rodian had been brash and cocky, but he'd told great stories over ale and game of cards. He'd been the youngest, too, a breath of fresh air in a group of bitter veterans. Now he was gone, just like...

...Just like almost every other pilot Radek had flown with during the war. Just like his wife and daughters.

"Payback," he hissed, "I want payback."

"That's what we're here for," Greepth said. "Follow me. We're forming up with Red Lead. They're trying to cut off some of the Vong."

"Sounds good to me," Radek said, and fired his engines. He and Greepth lurched ahead to three X-wings up ahead. A glance at his scanned told him Kang was gone.

Sithspawn, he wanted to kill at least *one* of those skippers before it was his turn to go.

"Forming on your wing, lead," Greepth said.

"Glad to have you," said Doveranti. "Okay, boys, get ready. Warm your torps and aim for that shuttle analog at four o'clock."

"I see a fighter escort," noted Do'varet.

"Then we punch through," Greepth said.

Radek checked his scanners. The skips were already peeling off their shuttle and heading for Red Squad.

"Weapons free!" Doveranti cried. "Hit 'em! Hit 'em!"

Space became a light show: burst of red plasma, fiery missiles, and proton torpedoes riding on luminous trails. Explosions blossomed in space and the static burst on his headset.

"Lead is down!" someone said. "We lost Red One!"

"I can't hold it," said another, Do'varet. "I can't-"

"I forgot how-"

Something clipped Radek's wing, sent him into a spin. Stars, lasers, flame whirled around him. He tugged his joystick and fired his engines to straighten out his flight. When space returned to some semblance of order he saw the asteroid-like lump of the Yuuzhan Vong shuttle, approaching fast. If he didn't pull up soon, he was going to hit it.

He tugged on his joystick, and nothing happened.

He tugged again and heard a pathetic groan as his port thrust engines died.

This was it, a part of his knew. No Fey'lya-style blaze of glory. Nobody would name a ship after him. He would die alone in an unnamed star system and nobody would ever know.

But at least he could hurt the Vong.

He fired his lasers. He pumped out every proton torpedo he had. The shuttle's dovin basals seemed to swallow everything like the miniature black holes they were. Again and again, they seemed to take everything he had and soon they would swallow him up as well-

-and then a torpedo exploded against the shuttle's hull, sending out chunks of yorik coral and licks of flame.

Radek grinned like a madman and gave his engines one last kick.

The stuff of nightmares killed his vision and swallowed up the universe.

Then the universe filled with a fire that never died.

Part I: Time Cannot Erase

Chapter 1

When the *Millennium Falcon* arrived at Hapes, the ragged old freighter had a royal honor guard waiting for it. A full squadron of elegant Miy'til fighters escorted them through a gauntlet of sleek Nova cruisers and down into the atmosphere toward the royal palace. When they disembarked they were greeted by almost a hundred Hapan guardswomen, all in crisp uniforms, standing at attention on either side of the berthed vessel. And waiting for them at the landing ramp: Uncle Luke in his dowdy brown Jedi robe, Zekk and his bride-to-be Taryn in the trim dark uniforms of Hapan guards, tall red-haired Tenel Ka looking almost comfortable in her royal robes, and finally Allana Solo Djo at her mother's side.

Allana rushed forward to hug her grandparents, leaving Jaina and Jag to go and greet Zekk, Taryn, and Tenel Ka. Jaina hugged Tenel Ka warmly, and Jag shook Taryn's hand with the formality he never learned to get rid of. When they turned on Zekk, Jaina saw him stiffen up even more: Five years back they'd both been bitter suitors for Jaina's affections, and while that contest had ended happily for all parties, Jag still

looked unsure of how to act. He was thus taken by surprise when Zekk grabbed him by the hand and pulled him into a back-slapping bear hug. The women, even Tenel Ka, giggled at the sight.

Jaina then went to shake Taryn's hand, saying, "Congratulations. It's been a long time coming."

"That is has, Solo." The Hapan woman smiled with aristocratic grace, though Jaina saw a stiffness there. Maybe she was less comfortable with her fiancé's old flame than Zekk.

Jaina turned on Zekk, from whom Jag had just disengaged. She looked him up and down and gave an honest smile. "Congratulations. It's about time."

"Thanks," Zekk smiled and extended a hand.

She reached out, took it, and with only slight hesitation they both went in for a hug. He was a full head taller than her and she rested her forehead against his chest as he gave her a warm pat on the shoulder-blades. All the confusions and tension that had marked their relationship seemed gone now, leaving only a friendship that had lasted more than half a lifetime.

"I'm very pleased to see all of you here," Tenel Ka said as they pulled apart. "And I'm sure Allana is pleased to spend more time with her grandparents."

"Probably not half as glad as Mom and Dad are to see her," Jaina sidled next to her old friend. The group watched Luke, Han, and Leia standing around the girl as she chattered away. She was almost nine years old now, and she'd started to stretch out into awkward adolescence. She had her mother's rich red hair, all right, but something in the shape of her face and her posture remarked on her father.

"I'm impressed with the honor guard. I haven't had one of those in a while," Jagged said, stroking the trim

black beard he'd let grow, the one Jaina had hated at first but gradually warmed to.

"The former Chief of State of the New Republic and guardians of my daughter?" Tenel Ka cocked a red eyebrow. "Not to mention my oldest friend and her husband? An honor guard is the least I could do."

"I'm flattered," Jag bowed slightly. "It just looks a little incongruous against, well, that." He waved a hand at the *Falcon*.

"Don't let my Dad hear that," Jaina poked him in the ribs.

"Yep," Zekk nodded. "I doubt you want to walk all the way home."

"Oh, don't worry, I've long ago worked out how to deal with the in-laws. So, where are the other Jedi? I expected there to be a nice Force-user convention for this wedding."

Tenel Ka said, "Quite a few already arrived with Master Skywalker. They're helping prepare for the ceremony."

"Ah, setting up the main hall? Putting up tables and the like? I can imagine Force-users are good at that sort of thing." He glanced sideways at Taryn. "Sometimes they make you feel like the little kid left out of playtime, but they're good to have by your side."

The Hapan woman smirked. "I've already noticed, yes. They've already almost completed preparations for the wedding."

Zekk draped a long arm across Jag's shoulders. "That means tonight we celebrate."

"Ah, your one last night of freedom?" Jag looked up at him. "Tell me, just what do Jedi *do* at bachelor parties?"

"My friend, you're about to find out."

“Me?” Jag gaped, and looked at Taryn, Tenel Ka, and Jaina. “Well, I’m, ah, quite flattered you want me to, ah, accompany you on the eve of your wedding. But what will the, ah, ladies be doing?”

“I’ve already made arrangements,” Taryn crossed her arms over her chest.

“Have you now?” Jaina asked. She wondered just what constituted a fun night for a girl like Taryn.

“Indeed,” said Tenel Ka, quite serious. “And I request your presence not just as a friend, but as Queen Mother of the Hapan Consortium.”

Jaina glanced at Jag, who looked just as nervous with Zekk’s arm around his shoulder.

“Well,” she said, “I guess we have no choice.”

Tenel Ka’s severe scowl lapsed into a smile. “Wonderful. I knew I could count on you, friend Jaina.”

If they were trying to be inconspicuous, they were failing miserably. Apparently Zekk had picked the place: some messy cantina located aboard Junction Station, an exchange and refueling site located on the rim of the Hapes system. Tenel Ka had taken great steps to open up the Hapan Consortium to the outside world, but foreign traffic onto the homeworld was strictly regulated, which meant most of the commerce with outside traders took place at Junction. From what Jag could tell, the station was owned by the Hapan government (hence the surplus of armed women police at all the airlocks and checkpoints) but the facilities were rented out to non-Hapan profit-seekers like the surly Aqualish who owned this cantina. It was an interesting setup, one which Jag had considered implementing in the Empire before things got crazy

with Jedi outcasts, ancient Force abominations, and Imperial attempts toward democracy.

This cantina was a place where nobody would recognize an off-duty Hapan guardsman, a Jedi Knight, or even an ex-Imperial Head of State (the beard threw people off; it was half the reason he'd grown it, over his wife's objections). However, when you threw them all together in the same booth, they tended to stand out. Especially if one of the Jedi was a giant Wookiee and the other was a Barabel.

They'd been in the bar for maybe an hour or so and Tesar and Lowbacca were already getting rowdy. Jag didn't know what they'd ordered, but something that could have gotten two oversized Jedi intoxicated that quickly would have probably knocked him dead. So he was content drinking some Hapan ale which, surprisingly, reminded him a little of old Bastion stout. Yet another way in which the Empire and the Hapans might not be so different after all. He decided to compare notes with Tenel Ka at some point.

He gave a yelp as Zekk dug a sharp elbow into his side. The tall, dark-haired Jedi barked over the din, "Well, what are you looking so glum about, shorty? The ale no good?"

"The ale is quite satisfactory," Jag said. "And I am not short."

Zekk cocked an eyebrow.

"I am *not*," Jag repeated. Shorter than Tesar and Lowie and Zekk, he'd admit, but not short. A good head taller than Jaina, for example. It wasn't his fault he was stuffed into a booth with giants.

"Well, this is my party," Zekk said, "Contribute, will you? Tell us some stories about the Chiss. They must throw great parties."

Lowbacca let out a big huffing laugh, and Tesar bore his big sharp fangs. “Yesss, tell us about your people, Fel. How did you celebrate after a great hunt?” His tail, sprawled to one side across the cushions, twitched eagerly.

“The Chiss were never ones for celebration, I’m afraid. Nor the Empire.”

“Oh, come on now,” Zekk said, “Everybody thinks Jedi were all stoic and stiff, but we know that isn’t true.”

“Well,” Jag pondered, “How about this? As pilots for the Chiss, you got special status if you became an ace with five combat kills. Now, whenever a pilot became an ace, we would go to his or her bunk before they returned to base and cover it with snow.”

“Snow?” Tesar hissed. “I do not understand.”

“Well, it’s an old Chiss tradition. There’s lots of snow on Csilla, after all.” Jag was wondering why he was telling this story in the first place, other than that it seemed like a good idea at the time. It also may have been the ale talking. “Anyway, the point is, once the pilot returns to his or her bunk, he or she will find the whole thing a cold, soggy mess and have no choice but to sleep in it.”

“That’s kriffing awful,” Zekk frowned. “How was *that* fun?”

“It was rather fun if you were one of the ones who got to sleep in a dry, warm bed that night,” Jag said.

Lowbacca howled a query.

“Well, yes, it does sound mean, but the point was to not let the pilot get too cocky.” Jag said. “It tells him or her, basically, you might be an ace, but you’re not so hot.” He paused. “Literally.”

Silence, across the table.

Eventually Zekk shook his head. "And I thought the Hapans were no fun."

"Are they truly no fun?" Tesar hissed. "Tell us, what is it like working in the company of so many beautiful femalez all the time?"

Lowbacca growled something, then woofed with laughter at his own joke,

"It is...." Zekk began, then stopped. He frowned, shook his head, laughed at something in his head, then said, "You just have to be careful."

"Ah, careful in what way, *old friend*?" Jag gave the man in nudge. "You're the only man on the job, right? The ladies must be very... competitive toward you."

"Hardly," Zekk chuckled. "Not when they know I'm with Taryn."

"Ahhh...." Tesar nodded. "The female of the species iz often quite protective of her mate. Az it should be."

"Yes, and *especially* Taryn, I think."

Lowie growled a question.

"Well, it's not *them* that has to be careful," Zekk said, "It's *me*." He paused. "Not that I would ever, *ever* do anything behind-"

"Of course," Jag said, "Say no more."

Lowbacca gave an affirmative roar.

Jag looked across the table at the Wookiee. "I'm sorry if I missed something, but Lowbacca, are you-"

The Wookiee roared again, and puffed his furry chest out proudly.

"I had no idea!" Jag said. "Congratulations! I'm sorry I missed it!"

Lowbacca waved away his apologies and added something else in a low groan, something Jag couldn't quite pick up above the din.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Jag leaned forward a bit.

Zekk clapped him on the shoulder and sat him back down. "Lowbacca here's going to be a father."

"Sithspawn!" Jag gaped. "Congratulations! Does Jaina know yet?"

The Wookiee shook his head.

"All right, I'll let you tell her." Jag said.

Zekk looked to Tesar. "What about you, my friend? Any news on the mating front?"

Tesar's tail thumped against the leather seating. "Ah, it iz too soon to say. I have yet to take mate, but I have been feeling, shall we say, *eager* lately. I hope to find a breeding-partner soon, if I can find the time."

"Well, good luck my friend." Jag raised a glass. "It is a hard course to fly, but worth it in the end."

Lowbacca roared and raised his glass across the table. Zekk tinkled his glass against Jag's, and the two men's eyes met and held. Then Zekk smirked and said, "The best hunt of all, isn't it?"

"Quite," Jag said, and downed the rest of his stout in one go.

"Ah, we seem to be finishing our drinkz," Tesar said. "I am quite willing to fetch another round."

Jag requested ale, Zekk requested Churban brandy, and Lowie asked for more of the same, whatever it was. Tesar wobbled a bit as he stepped out of the booth. His tail swung drunkenly back and forth as he walked for the bar. Zekk started to ask Lowie about his mate while Jag watched the less-than-sober Barabel Jedi approach the bar.

"So I have to ask," Jag said, "What is this like, being a Jedi?"

"What's what like?" Zekk asked.

Jag gestured to Tesar leaning over the counter, barking orders at a timid-looking Kubaz bartender.

“What is it like having the Force when you are mildly inebriated? I've always wondered, but Jaina refuses to tell me.”

Zekk and Lowie looked at each other, then started to laugh.

“What?” protested Jag. “I am legitimately curious. It's something I've always wondered about. Now don't make fun of me, I'd really like to know. Really.”

Suddenly there was a loud crash, and all eyes in the bar went exactly where Jag hoped they wouldn't: A big one-eyed Abyssin, sprawled across the floor, shattered glass sprayed in front of him. Behind him, looking a little sheepish, was Tesar, trying to tuck his tail out of the way.

The Abyssin scrambled to his feet. “You tripped me! You kriffing tripped me, you stupid lizard!”

“Perhaps you should watch where you are going!” Tesar bore his teeth, which should have warned off any sane or sober creature. The Abyssin, however, was clearly not the latter and maybe not the former, so instead of walking away he balled one hand into a black brick of a fist and swung it right at Tesar's snout. Tesar took the punch with ease, then sent his tail cracking whip-like across the Abyssin's legs, knocking him down again.

By that time, one giant Yuzzem and two Trandoshans had lumbered to their feet. Lowie was already charging out of the booth, and Zekk wasn't far behind.

Tesar, Lowie, and Zekk were all taller than Jag by a head, at least. All those aliens were over twice his mass.

If he were smart, Jag would abandon his comrades and get out of his place before station security came up and arrested all of them the night before Zekk's wedding.

“Oh, sithspawn,” he said, and charged in after them.

“So tell me,” Trista flashed Jaina a winning smile, “What do you think our menfolk are doing right now?”

“Knowing our menfolk? Probably telling war stories.” Jaina shrugged and took a sip from whatever cocktails the chefs had prepared.

The Queen Mother of Hapes couldn't exactly go out and party like the boys were apparently doing, but she could certainly throw one of her own. Jaina had been worried Taryn might try something more wild for her last night of freedom, but instead they were having a cozy, private meal for the four of them. Round after round of dishes came, always served by the most exquisitely handsome men. Taryn always greeted them with the most winning smiles, too. Jaina hoped Zekk could handle her, but he seemed to be doing fine so far.

She still hadn't talked much with Taryn, and wasn't sure what she's say if they did. Mostly she chatted with Trista, and was regaled by various stories of Hapan palace intrigue and covert missions. Taryn mostly talked with Tenel Ka, and Jaina was pleased to see how easily her old friend was smiling nowadays.

After the third or fourth round of food, Jaina and Tenel Ka excused themselves to go for a walk, leaving the Zel sisters to giggle between themselves. The two of them walked out across a balcony overlooking one of the palace guardians. Jaina knew some bodyguards were lurking in the shadows; she could feel them in the Force.

“They know to keep out of earshot,” Tenel Ka said, hooking her one arm into Jaina's. “It's taken a while, but now that Zekk and Taryn are in charge of security, I'm almost starting to feel safe in my own home.”

It was a joke, if Tenel Ka told jokes, which was a rarity. Mostly it seemed a sad statement about the kind of life she'd been living here for over a decade.

Jaina had felt sad for her friend when we forced to take the Hapan throne after her mother's murder. Tenel Ka had always preferred the life of a Dathomiri huntress to a Hapan noble, but in the end had found herself locked in a place she never wanted, with no friends except for the occasional Jedi visitor. In her loneliness she had sought to rekindle an old love, and that, too, had ended in tragedy.

Despite it all, here she was now, smiling gently as they walked across the balcony, taking in the warm night air and listening to the melodious calls of birds in the garden.

"You seem happy now," Jaina observed cautiously.

Tenel Ka tilted her head. "Do I?"

"You do. For a while..." Jaina trailed off. Never mention Jacen, not to her parents, especially not to his old love. "It must be good having Zekk and Taryn around. Do they help with Allana?"

"They do," Tenel Ka nodded. "I think Zekk likes it more than Taryn. He has a father's instinct, I think."

"Zekk?" Jaina laughed. "Well, maybe. He can be a little... over-protective sometimes."

Her mind flicked back to the time he had tried courting her. After his youthful brush with the Dark Side, Zekk had, more than any Jedi she knew, clung to all the lofty, noble ideals. Were it not for those scars left by the Shadow Academy, his aggressive righteousness would have made him seem naïve.

Tenel Ka said, "It is good having them around, Zekk especially. It is good to have another Jedi to train with, and to remind me of the old days." Her lips went flat,

and something sad came into her eyes, that same sad look Jaina saw on her parents and they must see on hers. But then Tenel Ka smiled again and said, "Allana is going to be a great Jedi. I'm going to miss her."

"Miss her?" Jaina asked. "Is she going to Shedu Maad soon?"

"Some day, and whenever that is, it will be too soon."

"Have you talked with Uncle Luke about it?"

"I have spoken with Master Skywalker. He is pushing, as gently as possible, for Allana to go to Shedu Maad within a year or two. He means well, of course."

"Of course."

The two of them looked out over the garden. Jaina looked up at the stars and thought back to another night on Hapes, long ago, when she and Jag Fel had been invited to a ball hosted by Queen Mother Ta'a Chume, and Kyp Durrón had come and snuck her out to see her brother Anakin's funeral. That was half a lifetime ago, Jaina thought with awe and sadness. Sometimes she forgot things about Anakin: his smile, his mannerisms, the habits that used to annoy her teenage self. She tried to cling on to them, but after so long they were slipping away. It seemed the opposite of Jacen, who seemed to linger in her thoughts, no matter how she tried to deny his memory.

"Are you happy, Jaina?" Tenel Ka asked softly.

Jaina was showing too much, either on her expression or in the Force. She got her face and feelings under control and said, "Yes. Are you?"

"I am," said Tenel Ka, and Jaina knew she meant it.

"Funny," Jaina gave a little laugh. "All this time I wondered what being happy feels like. Turns out it's pretty nice. But a little boring."

"Have you thought about starting a family?"

This was Tenel Ka speaking, so she certainly wasn't joking. Jaina said, "A little bit. But I don't think I'm that bored yet." And she thought of other parents: hers, who had lost two sons; Luke, who had lost his wife; Tenel Ka herself, who had watched the man she loved destroy himself. No, she did not want to think about parenthood any time soon.

If Tenel Ka sensed her thoughts, she didn't pry. Instead she gave Jaina's arm a gentle tug and leg her back toward the dining room, where they could hear the Zel sisters' chatter.

"We shall see about Zekk and Taryn," Tenel Ka said, "But at least we have Lowbacca's child to look forward to."

"What?" Jaina gaped. "Lowie's having a kid?"

Tenel Ka blinked in surprise. "I'm sorry! I thought you knew!"

"No! I haven't talked with Lowie in ages!" Jaina found herself grinning. "Lowie with a little wook of his own, huh? Boy or a girl?"

"I think... I will let him tell you." Tenel Ka gave a sly smile, and led her friend inside.

It lasted all of a minute before station security came charging in: four Hapan guardswomen with blasters drawn. In the course of that sixty seconds, Tesar had broken a table over the Yuzzem's mouth, Zekk had punched the Abyssin, Lowie had mauled a Trandoshan, and Jag had received a swift punch in the face.

"Oh, bloody hell," Jag ran a hand over his cheekbone. It was going to be bruised tomorrow unless he got a bacta patch on it right away.

"Ah, the cavalry haz arrived!" hissed Tesar.

"We're going to get arrested!" Jag spat.

Zekk held his hands up as the Hapan guards came to meet them. The guards grabbed everyone roughly, by arm or shoulder or collar, and hauled them out of the cantina and down into a service hallway, where they were lined up, hands against the wall. Jag got stuck between Zekk and the Yuzzem, who growled as it stared sidelong at him.

"This is all your fault," Jag snapped at Zekk. "Why did you invite me? You don't even *like* me!"

"Of course I like you. You're funny."

"*Funny?*"

Zekk shot him a look. "Was *your* bachelor party this fun?"

"I didn't get thrown in jail for drunk and disorderly, so no, I guess it wasn't."

"It will be fine, relax," Zekk looked over his shoulder and said, "Can I get something from my pocket, please?"

"Quiet, male," one of the guards snapped.

"You see, this is just a funny misunderstanding-"

She snapped, "According to Guideline 3-B of the Junction Station legal-"

"Oh, for frell's sake," Zekk sighed, something jumped out of his pocket and hovered in the air.

"Jedi!" one of the Abyssins shouted. "They're kriffin' Jedi!"

"Among other things," Zekk said. "Take a look at it, would you please?"

The guard frowned at the identicard floating in front of her, and carefully reached out to hold it. She looked it over, checked it with some sort of scanner, then said, "Let them go."

Zekk took his hands off the wall and turned to face the guard. "Apologies for the mess, Captain. We'll

make sure the cantina owner gets reimbursed for any damages.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard nodded.

“*Sir?!* ” shouted the Abyssin. “Who *are* these guys?”

Zekk kept his eyes on the guard. “Let’s keep this quiet, please.”

“Of course, sir.” It amazed Jag how quickly the guard snapped to obedience. The Hapans really could teach the Empire a thing about order. She handed Zekk back his identicard and asked, “Sir, should I assume these others instigated the confrontation?”

Zekk sighed as he pocketed the card. He looked over the men still up against the wall, the said, “Let them off with a warning.”

“Are you certain, sir?”

“Yes.” He leaned in close. “Just hold them until we depart, would you?”

“As you wish, sir. Do you require any medical assistance?”

“Ah, I could use some bacta patches,” Jag said. Down the line, Lowbacca gave a low rumble.

“A bit of help, yes,” Zekk nodded.

“Very well,” said the guard. “I can take your friends to the infirmary.”

“Lovely,” Zekk turned to his comrades. “Gentlemen, if you’ll follow the Captain here.”

Jag, Lowie, and Tesar stepped away from the wall. The Barabel was grinning that broad toothy grin, tail twitching in excitement, like he wanted another brawl. The Yuzzem looked light he might have taken him up on it, but another guard snapped, “All right, the rest of you come with us!”

“We didn't do anything!” the Abyssin shouted as the other guards led him away. “We got tricked! Tricked by them kriffin' Jedi!”

He was a drunk, and thug, but Jag had to admit he had a point. As they followed the captain down another set of corridors, he came up alongside Zekk and said, “That was a little bit of an abuse of power, wasn't it?”

“A bit, maybe,” Zekk shrugged. “But they did start it, and nobody got hurt.”

“Perhaps so,” Jag said. “Still, I am *not* going to tell my wife about this.”

“Good,” said Zekk, “Neither will I. Though for both our sakes we'd better hope they have fresh bacta patches in stock.”

Jag tentatively poked the welling bruise on his cheek, winced, and nodded in silent agreement.

Chapter 2

Whatever the band was playing, it was terrible. A Klatooinian was blaring her jizz-horn without any apparent consideration of tonality, and her Pa'lowick partner was strumming slowly on his bass like he was in a whole different world. And then there was the drummer, a squat pudgy Squib, who flailed his hands about like an infant throwing a temper tantrum. It would have been bearable if the cantina was nicer, but it wasn't. Ugly haze clung to the ceiling. The lights were dim. The ale was lousy, or so he'd heard. The gray old Wookiee tending bar looked ready to drop at any minute. Ben Skywalker had a hard time believing this place was one of the most important locations in galactic history.

But if his father had said so, it must be true. When sending Ben off on this mission, he'd gotten a little gleam in his eye and recommended Ben visit the Mos Eisley cantina, where Luke had first met Han Solo and Chewbacca almost fifty years ago. He'd even told Ben which booth they'd met at, and recommended he'd try it out. Ben had done as requested, and was pretty sure the upholstery hadn't been changed in all that time.

Ben had been from one end of the galaxy to the other, endured horrible struggles and seen great wonders, but he was not exactly a veteran bar-hopper. His companion seemed a little more familiar with how these places operated, so for the moment he sat in the far corner of the booth, watching Tahiri Veila lean over the bar and chat with the old Wookiee. When she was finally done, the small blonde-haired woman walked back over to the table, holding a big cup of something dark and bubbly. Like Ben, she was dressed in a casual brown jumpsuit with plenty of pockets to hide her blaster and lightsaber. She sat down wordlessly next to Ben and began sipping.

Ben watched her for about a minute before saying, "Well?"

"It's really not so bad," Tahiri looked down at her drink. "You know, Tatooine's not a brewer's paradise, so they have to import this stuff. You have to cut them a little slack."

"That's not what I meant," Ben sat back and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, really?" Tahiri asked. "You don't want to try?"

"I don't think I'm allowed," Ben said.

"You think anybody in this fine establishment cares about a legal drinking age?" Tahiri stabbed a finger at the black scorch-mark scoring the plaster wall behind him. "Besides, you're almost there."

"I don't think I *want* to try," Ben said.

"Suit yourself." Tahiri shrugged and took another drink. He watched her. She put the glass down and said, "He's not here yet, so cool your heels. We'll wait and take in the atmosphere."

"Atmosphere," Ben pointed to the smoke fogging around the dim overhead lights. "Is that what that is?"

"Call it history, then," Tahiri said. "You have to admit it's pretty exciting... The end of the evil Galactic Empire began in this very booth, in this smelly cantina in a dusty town on a worthless backwater planet..."

"Okay," Ben admitted, "I guess it is pretty wizard."

"Wizard?" Tahiri cocked an eyebrow.

"Old Tatooine slang," Ben said. "At least, that's what my dad told me. He was probably making it up. Or maybe not. You tell me."

Tahiri looked down at her glass. "I couldn't really tell you. I grew up on Tatooine, but I was raised by the Tusksens, remember? I didn't exactly get to pal around with the local farmboys."

Ben had been working with Tahiri for a while now, and he knew how to read her expressions. He knew when conversation was venturing to places she didn't like to go. So he decided to change the subject. It was a piece of advice he'd gotten from many adults over the years: when all other avenues of conversation dry up, talk about work.

"So," Ben said, "What are the odds he'll recognize us? I mean, maybe we should have, you know, put on a disguise or something."

Tahiri gave him a skeptical look. "Disguise?"

"I dunno. Give you some fake lekku. I'll shave my head, stick on some Zabrak horns. Or at least we could dye our hair. Red and gold stand out a little, y'know."

"Relax, Ben." Tahiri looked out at the crowd. "Traygo doesn't even know we're on to him."

"Maybe. But the guy spent a full day on Korriban. There's no telling who he found, or what."

"You're the one who explored the old Sith tombs a couple years back," she reminded him. "You didn't find anybody then."

"No. Not then." He fought a scowl. At the time, he, Luke, and Jaina had been with Vestara Khai. Vestara, who had by that time already wormed her way into his heart, almost convincing him that she was ready to give up her Sith heritage and walk the path of a Jedi. And Ben, young and lovestruck, had been perfectly willing to believe everything she said, including the stuff about there not being any Sith on Korriban.

"So, anyplace else you want to go on Tatooine?" Tahiri said abruptly. Maybe she had heard the same advice.

"Anyplace else? You mean, like sightsee?"

"Yeah. Did your dad tell you any more haunts to check out?" she gave him a sly smile. "Don't you wanna see where he hung out when he was your age?"

"According to my dad, he used to hang out at Tosche station and fool around with landspeeders and T-47s. He said he'd thought it was really boring at the time, that Tatooine was the furthest place from all the excitement in the universe. But then he shook his head and said how much he missed it nowadays."

"I can image," Tahiri said thoughtfully. "Your father is the last of the old Jedi and the first of the new. All the responsibility he has, all the things he's been through... If I were him, I'd want to hop in my old landspeeder and race through Beggar's Canyon too."

"Well," Ben asked a little cautiously, "Is there any place *you* want to see?"

She didn't give the please-don't-ask look, thankfully. Instead she stared up at the ceiling, thinking. She said, "I didn't live on Tatooine nearly as long as your father. Master Skywalker got to be a normal teenager, which is something neither of us ever did. I ended up on Yavin 4 when I was barely ten years old. I remember

things, obviously. But when I thought of Tatooine I'd think of..."

When she trailed off, Ben added, "Sand under your feet?"

She laughed a little. For a long time she'd preferred to go around barefoot, but recently she'd started wearing boots again.

"Sand under my feet. Yeah, there's that."

"Doesn't it get hot?" Ben asked.

"Only if you walk on it during the day, which is a dumb thing to do," she said. "But it's not just sand under my feet. The Dune Sea is... amazing, really. It really is just an ocean of sand, and in the daylight the entire thing glows so bright, and when the sun starts to set all these little shadows appear at the crest of every dune, and they stretch and stretch as the sun goes down until the entire landscape turns to shadow."

As she spoke a smile came to her face: Soft, calm, nostalgic. He rarely saw her like that. He said, "That sounds nice."

"You bet it is," Tahiri agreed. "I always hated Coruscant. Yavin was nice, because there was so much nature, but Coruscant, and all those Core Worlds... No. Not for me."

"Well, once we wrap this up, we can take a tour of the Dune Sea," Ben said.

"Maybe," Tahiri leaned forward again. "That'll depend on what Mister Traygo has to tell us."

"Assuming he has anything at all," Ben said. "For all we know, he really may have just been a random treasure-hunter."

"Doesn't fit his profile," Tahiri shook her head. "He does odd jobs, but always on contract. We're lucky we were able to track him this far."

“Even more lucky he likes this place as a watering-hole.” Ben said. “What are the odds, right?”

“It's a small planet, Ben.”

“Yeah, but this one cantina over all the ones in Mos Eisley, or Mos Espa, or Bestine...”

“Hmm. You're right. Must be the Force at work.”

“You serious?” The idea made Ben a little anxious.

Tahiri shrugged and took another drink. Her glass was about half-empty now and Ben, forcing himself to be honest, was just a little, teensy bit curious what they ale was like, and he knew she'd let him try some if he asked. Despite being almost twice his age, Tahiri treated him like an adult, even moreso than his cousins. That Ben had played a critical part in bringing Tahiri back from the Dark Side may have been related, but not something either of them were in the habit of dwelling on. Every partnership had certain no-go zones both parties agreed to respect.

“Look alive,” Tahiri said in a hushed voice. “We've got incoming.”

Ben didn't look around, didn't sit up straight, didn't show any signs of alertness at all. His Galactic Alliance Guard training had been useful in some ways. He knew how to not look suspicious. So he slumped back in his seat and played with the cuffs on his sleeves, glancing up now and then to see Therman Traygo walk up to the bar and order a drink.

Traygo was an Aqualish dressed in a red flight suit, so he was easy to keep an eye on. He spent a good five minutes chatting with the Wookiee bartender, who did a very good job of *not* looking at their booth, as Tahiri had surely instructed.

“Well,” Ben said while staring at his sleeves, “What now?”

"We wait," Tahiri said, head angled down at her drink while she watched Traygo from the corner of her eyes. "We don't want to make a scene in the bar. Once he leaves, we'll follow."

"Sounds good to me," Ben said. "Hopefully he doesn't stay forever."

"Hopefully he stays just long enough to get a little drunk," Tahiri said. "He'll be easier to handle that way."

"Hopefully," repeated Ben, but just as soon as he said so Traygo stepped away from the bar, checked his chrono, and headed for the exit. He hadn't even bought a drink.

"Sithspit, that was fast," Tahiri said, getting to her feet.

Ben rose too, more slowly than her. They made their way for the exit casually, looping around tables and people so as not to draw attention to themselves. As they walked Ben saw Tahiri throw a glare at the Wookiee bartender, who responded with a lanky shrug.

The sun was starting to set over Mos Eisley, and while the sky was still aglow long shadows were filling the city's streets and alleys. It was lucky for them that Traygo was wearing a bright red jumpsuit. They stayed on his tail, following him down the main drag running from the cantina to the old crashed starship-turned-casino his father had told him about. The streets were full of Jawas and humans and every kind of alien in between, but Traygo's red jumpsuit, combined with his hulking Aqualish height, made him an easy target.

It was, therefore, easy to notice when he abruptly disappeared. Ben and Tahiri, staggered slightly apart in the crowd, began squeezing their way forward. When they got to the point where Traygo had slipped from

view they found a narrow alley between two sand-colored building-sides, barely wide enough for Traygo to have snuck through. There was no other place for him to have gone, of course, so Ben plunged in first, Tahiri right behind him. The crowd on the street didn't seem to notice.

The alley seemed to swallow up all light, but Ben plunged forward, daring to reach out with the Force for Traygo's presence. There was no indication that the petty crook and sometimes-courier was Force-sensitive, but when dealing with potential Sith allies it never hurt to guard your presence. So Ben reached out lightly, and felt a presence further down the alley, around the nearest corner. No, not one presence, two. He abruptly stopped in his tracks and looked back at Tahiri, who nodded. She'd felt it too. She flicked a hand up, two fingers pointed to the sky. Ben nodded, reached out with the Force to give him a boost, and propelled himself up over the building-side, onto the roof.

He crouched low as he scampered over the rooftop, from one edge to the next. When the narrow alley turned a corner it opened up into a slightly larger one, where two people had enough room to face each other with space to spare. Ben circled around to the far end, where the wide alley split into two narrow ones branching off in opposite directions. He crouched low over the rim of the building and tentatively peeked his head over the edge. Traygo was there, facing a humanoid wearing a brown vest over a dark-green shirt and khaki trousers. He, or she, seemed to have a short-brimmed animal-skin cap pulled over a head of shaggy brown hair. When Ben looked closer, he saw a pair of dark goggles pulled over the being's eyes, whatever that meant. They were talking with Traygo in hushed

tones. The Aqualish seemed to be gesticulating while the other being stood with arms crossed, barely moving.

Ben reached out with the Force again and felt Tahiri waiting at the far corner. He weighed his options carefully, as he'd been taught by his late GAG mentor Lon Shevu. Charge in now and you'll probably catch them by surprise, but you'll lose the chance to observe. Wait and observe, and something unexpected might happen to change the situation and cost you your advantage.

Maybe Ben was getting cocky, but he thought it better to wait. Whoever Traygo was meeting, they might have been a Sith agent too. He wondered if he and Tahiri should split up, one shadowing Traygo and the other shadowing this new arrival, but if either party had back-up, it would leave the solo Jedi outnumbered and at risk. The choice was a heavy responsibility, and Ben rolled different options back and forth in his head, trying to guess which one would lead to the best outcome. The Force, alas, wasn't being very helpful.

He watched them and debated with himself for maybe two minutes, though it felt longer. He was jerked out of his reverie when Traygo took something out of his vest: a slim silver data-rod. The other being- Ben was pretty sure they were human, and probably female- took the rod, looked it over, then pulled a small personal datapad out of her vest. She slid the rod into the pad and its flat-screen viewer buzzed to life. From his distance Ben couldn't make out much, but it seemed like text and numbers were running on the screen. Then the woman flipped off the screen and stuffed both pad and data-rod into her vest. She reached into another pocket and drew out something else. A small card, probably containing stored credits or access to a bank

account. The trans-action was almost over, and Ben was faced with sudden decision: jump them now, while they were still focused on whatever deal was going down, or wait a little longer to see if anything else passed between them.

He made the decision fast. He sent a signal to Tahiri through the Force, simple and clear: *Now!*

They appeared at the same time, at opposite mouths of the alley: she popping around the corner, he dropping down from above. They both ignited their lightsabers and held them high, as much for warning as defense.

“Halt!” Tahiri called. “Put your hands on your heads! Now!”

Traygo looked bewildered, but didn't raise his hands. One hand however over the blaster pistol slung at his hip. The woman held her hands away from her body, but not up in the air. She looked back and forth between Ben and Traygo. The black goggles hid her eyes and parts of her face, but she looked little older than Ben. For a second she almost looked like Vestara Khai.

The thought shocked Ben. She wasn't Vestara, she couldn't be. Her hair was chopped short. She didn't carry herself like Vestara. And her face was too wide, her chin a little too prominent, her left cheek a little too pocked. No, the stranger wasn't Vestara, the Sith girl who had wooed him and tricked him and shattered his heart, but she *could* have been, and that was enough to make Ben drop his guard.

In one swift motion, the girl spun, plucking a blaster pistol from the inside of her vest. She raised it and fired, not at Ben or Tahiri, but at Traygo standing right in front of her.

The shot hit him dead in the forehead. He didn't even register surprise before dropping.

Ben lurched forward, Tahiri too. The girl pulled something else from her vest and threw it to the ground. Suddenly the alley was filled with light and heat. A stabbing pain shot through Ben's temples, dropping him to the floor. He heard nothing, felt nothing over the pain, not even the Force.

It was gone as quickly as it had come. Suddenly the shadow-dark alley returned: Ben and Tahiri, on their knees, clutching their heads. A small scorch mark on the ground. And Traygo lying face-up and dead, black eyes dimly reflecting the sunset glare overhead.

"I missed it!" Ben grimaced. "I missed her! I let her—"

"Get over it, Ben!" Tahiri scowled, rising to her feet. She lunged forward and picked Ben off the ground as well. She gave him a sharp slap in the face and said, "Where did she go? Can you feel her? I can't feel her!"

Ben looked at the three exits from the alley and reached out with the Force, trying to find some indication of their quarry. He reached out farther, beyond the walls, into the buildings, the rooftops, the other streets.

Then he found her. He saw her for just a second in his mind's eye, slipping into the crowd on the main thoroughfare, heading for the spaceport.

"Come on," Ben took Tahiri by the shoulder. "I've got her."

Chapter 3

The wedding went smoothly, and nobody noticed his battle-wounds. Well, nobody said anything about them, not even Jaina, so Jag counted it a victory.

Despite the number of important persons attending Zekk and Taryn's wedding, the ceremony was a relatively small one. The celebration afterward was held in one of the moderately grand ballrooms that filled the Hapan palace. Taryn danced with Zekk, Jagged with Jaina, Han and Leia with each other for a bit, until Allana poked her way in and shared a fun, awkward dance with her grandparents. Trista danced first with a befuddled-looking Raynar Thul, followed by a more savvy Kyp Durren, then Jaden Korr, then (awkwardly) Lowbacca, and finally (impossibly) Tesar, who seemed to lumber more than usual, possibly because of a half-complete recovery from last night's events.

At once point, as the dancing wound down from raucous to refined, the Queen Mother took to the dance floor and performed a short, formal dance with Luke Skywalker, Grand Master of the Jedi.

As he shuffled softly with his arms on Jaina, Jag wondered just what kind of political repercussions that could have. Even if this was, relatively, a closed party, the Hapan aristocratic rumor mill was worse than the Empire's, and the Jedi-phobic elements of Hapes, who had clearly never liked the idea of a Jedi Queen Mother, would be incensed to see her openly dancing with the symbol of all they dreaded.

"Very bold of her," Jag whispered to Jaina.

His wife swallowed hard and nodded.

"She's always had to keep her distance from the Jedi order in public," he continued, "And I suppose she deserves a private lapse every now and then, but..."

He looked at Jaina. Her eyes were wet. She blinked away tears.

"Jaina, what is it?" He pulled her a little closer.

"They're both missing someone," she leaned in, and rested her head against his shoulder.

Jag understood now. Stupid, stupid man, to be thinking about politics at a time like this. Luke and Tenel Ka certainly weren't. They disengaged after a few minutes, and Luke gave the Queen Mother a formal curtsy. They parted with sad smiles.

After that the band struck up something much more lively. Taryn dragged Zekk into the middle of the dance floor, and not to be outdone Trista dragged a protesting Lowbacca to join them. Jag dreaded the thought of being forced to act unbecoming in public, but thankfully Jaina wasn't interested in dancing any more either. They walked around the rim of the dance floor, watching Lowie flail his long furry arms about and make a fool of himself. They pulled up seats next to a table where Han, Leia, Tenel Ka, and Allana had sat down.

"So," Jaina flashed a Solo grin at her niece, "You enjoying family time with grandpa and grandma?"

"Yeah! I haven't seen them in forever!" Allana laughed.

"We missed you too, darling," Han patted her red head.

"But where's cousin Ben?" Allana frowned. "He hasn't been around at all!"

Jaina shrugged. "You'll have to ask Uncle Luke. Something important and mysterious, I'm sure."

"Jedi business," Han tapped the side of his nose. "They always play it close to the chest, don't they?"

"We have to nowadays," Luke said as he dropped into the seat between Han and Jag. "Wynn Dorvan has agreed to keep the Alliance out of Jedi business, and we have to do the same."

"Keeping out other people's business?" Han cocked an eyebrow. "Never been the way of any Jedi I've met."

"There are always things a Jedi can do," Luke said, "But some are more low-profile than others. Not unimportant, just low-profile."

"So is it about the Monolith? Or that dagger thing you were looking for?"

"Han," Leia gently slapped him on the arm, "Jedi business. Hush-hush."

"Uncle Luke?" Allana asked, a little timidly.

"Yes, sweetie?" Luke leaned toward her. "What is it?"

"Uncle Luke, when do I get to go to Shedu Maad?"

The loud dance number faded out. An awkward silence fell across the table. As a new song started up, Luke said, "We'll have to talk about that, you and me and your mother. But now's not the time."

"Okay," Allana looked down. "I didn't think so. I just wanted to be sure."

"Do you *want* to go, Allana?" Tenel Ka asked, voice guarded.

"Some day," Allana said. "But I want to stay with you for a while, mama."

"Good," Tenel Ka broached a smile, reached out, and took Allana's hand. "I'm glad."

"Mama," Allana asked, "Can I see where *you* trained?"

Tenel Ka stiffened. She looked at Luke, then Jaina. The Jedi hadn't set foot on Yavin 4 for almost twenty years. It had been lost to the Yuuzhan Vong then, and the Jedi Academy transferred first, foolishly, to the Maw, later to Ossus itself, and finally to Shedu Maad.

"You've told me about it, and Jaina too," Allana pressed. "You talked about how beautiful it was. The big temples and the way the jungle smelled at morning."

"That was a long time ago," Jaina said. Her voice was tense. "Then the Yuuzhan Vong came."

"But the Vong are gone now!" Allana said. "They're all on Zonama Sekot. There's no more on Yavin 4, right?" She looked around. "Right?"

Luke folded his hands calmly in front of him. "The Alliance did a thorough search for the Yuuzhan Vong and their artifacts on many worlds, but Yavin 4 wasn't one of them."

"Has anybody been there since?" Han asked. "Anybody at all?"

"The Jedi never sent anyone," Luke said, "As to who else might have gone there, I can't guess."

"I do rather wonder what it's like," Tenel Ka said. "I suppose, most likely, it returned to the same wild state

it was in for four thousand years before the Rebels built their base there.”

“It could be useful to go,” Jag put in. “At least to give a cursory scout of the area.”

Jaina gave him a warning look, the kind he got when he said something wrong and had no idea what. He decided to keep his mouth shut.

But apparently Luke was running with the idea as well. “I’ll admit it would be nice to run a survey of the Temple complex and maybe recover missing artifacts, if they’re still there after all this time.”

“We could go!” Allana was getting more excited, the kind of excited it was hard to turn down when coming from a ten-year-old girl. “You and me, mama, and Aunt Jaina, maybe we could bring Uncle Zekk and Taryn along too!”

“What a honeymoon!” Han laughed.

“I really don’t think it would be safe,” Jaina said severely. “Yavin 4 was always a wild planet, and it has a history of the Dark Side.”

“I’ve been through a lot,” Allana said with sudden maturity. “I can take care of myself.”

And she was right, of course. The little girl was the scion of two powerful Jedi, and had already been through more danger and adventure in her short ten years than most beings would go through in a lifetime. And, in all probability, Yavin 4 was a perfectly safe world. Still, Jaina seemed dead-set on not going, for reasons he clearly wasn’t going to pry into at this current meeting.

He was almost relieved when a tap came on his shoulder, and a comely Hapan guardswoman said, “Mister Fel? We have a message for you in the communications room.”

"Now?" Jag stared at her, puzzled. He was trying to figure out who even knew he was here right now. It was a very short list.

"If you'd come this way, please?"

Jag looked around the table, shrugged, and excused himself. He followed the guardswoman out of the ballroom, down a few rose-marble corridors, and finally into a utilitarian communications room with a high-quality holographic imager in one corner. When he turned it on he wasn't surprised to see Vitor Reige. It was, after all, a short list.

The Imperial Head of State was a little older than Jag but already starting to go gray at the temple. A sign of stress, most likely. Sometimes Jag wondered if Reige hated him for thrusting him into the role of juggling all the awkward balls of the Empire- the Moff's, the military, the intelligence system, the banks, the civilians- but if he did, he never showed it. At the moment, he looked positively grateful to see Jag.

"Good evening, sir," Jag said. "Or whatever time it is there."

"Mid-afternoon, actually." Reige said. His mouth opened for a 'sir,' then snapped shut. All this time and he still hadn't quite mastered the authoritarian art, at least not where his former boss was concerned.

"Well, may I ask the reason for this call?"

"We have detected an event just beyond our borders. Our listening station at Plasse Kothol detected unusual readings approximately twenty parsecs outside the officially-designated borders of the Unknown Regions."

"And you think the Chiss were involved? I haven't heard anything from Csilla, but if you wish I could send out feelers."

“More than that, Mr. Fel. We sent out reconnaissance vessels to the scene afterward.”

Jag cocked a brow. “But that's outside our borders.”

“It was my decision,” Reige said firmly. Good for him, Jag thought. “We recovered some... interesting artifacts.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Not over hyperlink, no.”

“I assure, there's few more secure channels in the galaxy.”

“Maybe so, but I would prefer to speak in person. I think you should see it yourself.”

Jag forced down a sigh. He really, really didn't want to leave Jaina in the lurch like this, but Reige sounded serious indeed. He said, “When are where do you want to meet?”

“I'm sending that information encrypted in this message now.” Reige's holo nodded to some unseen comm officer. “And please relay this same information to your personal contacts.”

Which meant the Chiss, of course. He was asking a tall order. Jag might have been Emperor once, but nobody ordered the Empire of the Hand around, and he'd been exiled from Csilla proper some ten years ago. But he nodded and said, “I will, though I can't promise anything.”

“I understand. And, thank you, Mister Fel.”

“My pleasure, Head of State Reige,” Jag gave a short bow, and holo winked off. As a comm officer handed him the data chip with the coordinates, he tried not to sigh.

The next morning, he packed his bags and got ready to go. Jaina stood in the corner of their cramped cabin

on the *Falcon*, watching him pack. To his surprise, she didn't seem angry with him. More resigned than anything else, really. She had other things on her mind.

"And Master Skywalker is really okay with this?" he asked as he stuffed too many pairs of shirts into his suitcase. "I mean, I guess you can't request an Alliance scouting party or anything..."

"Mom still has a few friends on Coruscant. She's getting us the records from the last clean-up expedition to Yavin 4, right after the war ended." Jaina's arms were folded sternly around her chest. "That can be our in-flight reading material."

"Well, it's always best to be prepared." Jag said weakly, wishing he knew what was at the end of his own journey.

"Honestly, it's really nothing to worry about. The planet's probably completely abandoned, and anyway we're coming prepared. Me, Tenel Ka, Zekk, and Lowie, plus Taryn should be enough to guard Allana."

"Quite a honeymoon for them, isn't it? Well, I guess Zekk can show his new bride where he spent his gilded youth."

Jaina gave a long, long sigh. Her head hung low. Jag stepped close to her and put a hand on each shoulder. "Jaina, if you want to tell me what's wrong, I'm more than willing to listen."

She nodded, but didn't look up. "It's just been a long time is all. I never thought I'd go back to Yavin 4."

"Those were good years though, weren't they?"

"They were. But they're gone. And I don't want to remember them."

It was about Jacen, of course. Her brother was like a black hole in the middle of their lives, something they always maneuvered around but never got close to,

something they never even looked at for fear of being dragged in. Jag had lost siblings of his own, but could never know the pain Jaina felt, the pain of being forced to kill her own twin brother, could never be understood. So they ignored the pain, and worked around it, and most of the time they could be happy.

“What does Tenel Ka think?” Jag asked, softly.

“I don't know. I think... I know she must be feeling some of the same things I am. But she seems like she wants to do this, almost.”

“She probably wants to show things to her daughter.”

“I know. And I hope...” Jaina fell forward, away from the wall and against his chest. He held her in both arms and she weakly returned his hug. Into his chest she said, “I hope Allana makes this easier.”

“You don't have to go,” he reminded her.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Just like you.”

Jag nodded, and kissed her once on the head. There was no escaping duty, no matter the form.

Chapter 4

Whoever she was, she was fast.

She was nimble and small and could slip through the crowd with ease as she made her way toward the spaceport. Thankfully, Ben and Tahiri were also nimble and not very big, but even then they could only get so far without pushing people around and throwing the busy street into a panic, which would make things even worse.

So they pressed on the best they could. Ben was constantly reaching out with the Force, touching that distant mind that radiated both panic and determination. He led Tahiri down streets, through alleyways, closer and closer until they reached the spaceport itself.

They caught up with her right before she reached the landing zone. An old metal stairwell spiraled up to the rooftop pad, where a small gray Cloakshape fighter sat next to an old refitted two-seater Y-wing. In the light of Tatooine's two suns, it was clear that both ships were old, dinged, and dirty, especially the Y-wing. The girl was halfway up the winding stairs when they reached the bottom. When Ben ignited his lightsaber she spun around, clinging with one hand to the railing

and firing at him with the other. Ben deflected the bolts harmlessly into the wall, but instead of taking another shot the girl swore and threw her entire blaster down at him. She turned and started running again, but not before dropping something out of her gloved hand.

Before Ben could register what it was, Tahiri reached out with the Force and swatted it aside before it could hit the ground. It careered into the closest wall and exploded with the same flash of soundless light as the other one. It might have been farther away than the other one, but the explosion still sent a jab of pain stabbing into Ben's temple and dropping him to the ground.

He tried to shove the pain away and stumbled for where the spiral staircase should have been, though his vision was still a jumble of bright shapes. He felt smooth metal, and heard feet clattering upward just ahead of him. He reached out, felt the low grooves on the first metal stair, and pulled himself forward, scampering awkwardly on all fours as his vision slowly returned.

Still on hands and feet, he followed Tahiri's boots up the spiral ladder until they both emerged atop the landing pad. The girl was closing the cockpit of her Cloakshape fighter and its engines roared to life. Tahiri, apparently less dazed than Ben, sprinted forward, lightsaber ignited. The Cloakshape thrust into the air on its repulsors, retracted its landing gear, and swung to face the two Jedi.

Before it could bring its two forward laser cannons to bear, Tahiri threw herself into the air, landing atop the fighter's broad left wing. Her lightsaber still blazed and traced a shallow, seared-black arc across the surface of the wing. The fighter shuddered, but didn't seem to have taken permanent damage.

The engines gave a louder roar, and the fighter began to lift into the air. Tahiri, still kneeling on the wing, lifted the lightsaber into a two-handed grip and raised it above her head, ready to stab downward, deep enough to damage the engine and maybe send the whole ship blowing up in their faces.

Then the Cloakshape jerked hard, dipping the wounded engine downward. Tahiri lost her balance and tumbled backward. Ben reached out with the Force to cushion her hard landing on the landing pad, but he could do nothing about the fighter, which shot toward the sky on jets of red energy.

"Are you okay?" Ben said as he ran to Tahiri's side.

The woman scowled and scrambled to her feet, stuffing her lightsaber into her jacket. "I'm fine. You know how to fly a Y-wing?"

Ben looked at the other fighter on the pad. Its cockpit was open and it looked like somebody had been working on it not long ago.

"No idea," Ben said. "You?"

"Nope."

"Well," he said, "How hard could it be?"

It wasn't easy, but at least it wasn't impossible. The Y-wing had been a mainstay of the Rebellion's fleet along with the X-wing, and their cockpit designs were similar despite having different manufacturers. Ben figured out how to close the cockpit first, sealing him in the front seat and Tahiri in the rear. It was easy enough to turn the engines on too, though they groaned in protest and rocked the ship way too much for comfort.

"Can you get the scanner working?" Ben asked. "Can you find her?"

"Just a sec...." she said from behind. "Wait. Wait, I got it. She's climbing fast, already in upper atmosphere.

I'd give her three minutes before she escapes the gravity well."

"I guess that means we have to be fast then," Ben said, looking for the switch to kick in repulsors and lift off.

"Yeah, Y-wings are famous for their speed."

"Good thing she's in an old junker too," Ben said. He thought he found the right switch and flipped it. No time for second-guesses. He was jerked in his seat as the repulsors kicked in, shakily lifting the Y-wing over the landing pad.

"Feels like liftoff," Tahiri said.

"Feels like," Ben agreed, and cut the engines. As the Y-wing kicked forward he felt like his guts were being shoved through his kidneys, and his vision momentarily swam. Then it cleared, and he pointed the Y-wing straight for the rosy sky.

"Inertial dampeners feel wonky," Tahiri commented.

"Yeah, I know. Hopefully they'll be better in space," Ben said. Through the darkening afternoon sky he could already see the faint glow of stars. As the Y-wing stabbed upward into space he scanned for the twin red engine-trails of the Cloakshape, but he couldn't find them.

"Is she still here?" He asked, panicked. "Did she jump to hyperspace?"

"Keep your pants on, she's still there," Tahiri said. "Heading for point oh-five-seven."

"Copy," Ben said and corrected his heading, though he still didn't see any sign of the Cloakshape. "Hey, does this thing have working ion cannons?"

"That would be ideal," Tahiri said. "Still trying to figure that out."

"Well figure out fast. I want to stun her as soon as we can."

Tahiri grunted an acknowledgement, but nothing more. Hopefully she was fast on her way to figuring out the guns. Ben looked over his console, trying to find the armament system. If memory served, Y-wings had laser cannons and a launcher for proton torpedoes, though he doubted the latter were loaded onto this old junker.

“Hey Ben,” Tahiri said.

“What?”

“Think they’ll notice we took their ship?”

“I don’t know,” Ben shook his head, annoyed that he still couldn’t see the Cloakshape. “How long until she leaves the gravity well?”

“About sixty seconds.”

“Is that enough time? I can’t even see her!”

“Patience, young Jedi, I’ve got her in my sights,” Tahiri chided him. “Look ahead, thirty degrees to port.”

Ben stared ahead. By now the last light of the atmosphere had faded and all that remained was a vast field of stars, underlit by the golden-brown glow of the desert world. Peering into the darkness he was just able to make out the Cloakshape’s two red engine-trails.

“I see her,” Ben said. “Got those ions online?”

“Yup,” Tahiri said. “Not sure if they’ll work, but they’re tracking the target. Bring your forward guns online, start firing warning shots. Laser blasts have longer range than ions and we need to distract her while we get in close.”

“Will do,” Ben said. As soon as he figured out how. As the engine-trails of the Cloakshape getting steadily brighter, he scoured his controls. The firing mechanism for the forward cannons was right in the control stick, but from what he could tell his weapons were offline.

"Get ready, Ben," Tahiri said. "She's entering your firing range."

"I got it," Ben insisted, though he still couldn't find the right switch.

Then he saw it- right beneath the turned-off targeting display, the paint on the button chipped off so all its label read was "non on." He flicked the switch and the heads-up holo flicked to life. Red and green reticules appeared on his forward viewport. He nudged the stick and shifted them toward the Cloakshape. By now he could see not just her engines, but the broad pale shape of her wings.

"I got her!" Ben said, nudged the reticules slightly up, and thumbed the firing switch.

When the red laser blasts show over her bow, the Cloakshape made a surprised downward jerk. Ben fired a few more and said, "How're those ions coming?"

"Ten seconds 'til range," Tahiri said. "Keep her pinned down inside the gravity well. Angle down when I tell you."

"Copy," Ben said, and fired a few more shots. The Cloakshape rolled hard to port but Ben followed, lacing Tatooine's lower orbit with flashes of red. The Cloakshape pitched itself downward, deeper into the planet's gravity well. Its red engines now blazed against the bright gold-brown glow of the desert world. Ben nudged his control stick down and followed.

"Dive steeper!" Tahiri commanded. "I can't get a good lock from this angle!"

"If I do those inertial dampeners might pop," Ben said. He was already feeling smashed into his seat, and his head was swimming.

"That's probably what she wants. Just do it!" Tahiri shouted.

Ben pushed the stick forward even more, sending his Y-wing in a perilous nose-dive toward the planet's surface. He heard the crackle of the ion cannon turrets firing just above his head, and saw lances of blue energy stab toward the Cloakshape. The fighter was already in a steep dive, but she attempted to roll out of the blasts' way. The shot that should have nailed her engines instead clipped one wing, causing blue lightning the dance across across the fighter's surface. One engine blinked out.

"One engine down!" Ben said and relaxed the Y-wing's dive. His head still ached and his breath sucked into his stomach, but he didn't feel in danger of passing out.

"Ben," Tahiri said, "What's she doing? My sensors are going haywire. Might be bad feedback from the guns."

Ben watched the one red engine-trail plunge deeper toward the planet. "Looks like she's gonna try and land on the planet."

"Keep her on her toes until I get the guns back," Tahiri said.

"Copy that," Ben agreed, and fired a few more shots over the Cloakshape's bow. She was plunging deeper and deeper into the atmosphere, though the sky gradually absorbing both fighters was the bright blue of midday instead of the rosy gold of sunset. Wherever she was headed, it wasn't Mos Eisley. Assuming she was heading for anyplace specific it all.

"Ions won't do any good now," Ben said. "We need to force her to land, not crash!"

"Just stay on her," Tahiri said. "Don't let her go."

He could see the limping fighter clearly now as he came up on her rear. She wasn't even trying to evade,

and Ben wondered if maybe the ion blast hadn't damaged life support or knocked the pilot unconscious. He fired a few shots to the fighter's left, but got no response.

"She looks on course to crash!" Ben said. "I think she might be injured. The pilot, I mean."

"Sand can absorb the impact as long as she doesn't go too fast," Tahiri said. "How's her speed?"

"Still good for one engine," Ben said. "What should we do?"

Suddenly something dark flashed beneath the Cloak-shape. It gained size rapidly, almost like an object dropped in the fighter's wake. Ben barely had time to yelp his surprise before it exploded right in front of him, raining shrapnel on his fighter.

He grabbed the control stick and jerked it hard in an attempt to pull away, inadvertently firing off a round of laser-blasts then clipped the Cloakshape in the good wing and sent black smoke trailing. He barely had time to register the sight, though, before the shrapnel made a dozen white cracks in his viewport. The heads-up display shorted out. Some kind of gas started spewing into the cockpit. The stick jumped in his hand and he felt his port engine die. The fighter plunged toward the desert below. The red-gold of the desert filled his vision.

"I can't pull up!" Ben squawked. "Engine gone! I can't maneuver!"

"Hold on tight!" Tahiri shouted. "Try and do a belly-flop!"

"I just said I don't have control!"

"Cut the engines and fire the repulsors!"

The rolling golden dunes were approaching fast and the hairline cracks in his viewport were getting longer

and longer before his eyes. Ben cut the engines and felt his stomach shoot into the mouth as the Y-wing began a free-fall.

“Repulsors!” Tahiri screamed. “Do it now! Now!”

Ben felt like the inertia was going to throw him up through the roof of his cockpit. Wind whistled like shrill alarms through the growing cracks in the transparisteel. He reached out to the control board to fire his repulsors but the whole cockpit jerked violently around him. He felt so dizzy he was going to throw up, meal, stomach, and all.

“Now!” Tahiri kept screaming. “Now! Now! Now!”

He lunged forward against his seat restraints and stabbed the button. As he did so the viewport suddenly shattered. Wind and shrapnel exploded in his face. The golden sand-dunes filled his vision. His father's world rushed to greet him.

Then he blacked out.

Chapter 5

The Miy'til fighter Jagged Fel had borrowed from Tenel Ka reverted to realspace at the instructed coordinates. Jag had already looked up the location before plotting his course, and by all accounts it was empty space, stranded a dozen parsecs from any star system. He shouldn't have been surprised to see an empty starfield, but he was.

Still unused to the controls of the fighter, Jag cycled through its long- and short-range sensor systems. He'd anticipated some ship, Imperial or perhaps Chiss, but all he could find was empty space.

"Well," he muttered, "I hope they gave me the right coordinates."

No ships or life signs showed up on sensors, so he began looking for material and plasma traces. The thought occurred to him that there might have been a fight here, but he detected no debris or residual energy signatures. Everything from his eyes to the Miy'til's sensors told him the same thing: This was empty space, as lifeless as the abyss between galaxies.

He checked the communications array and saw it was possible to send a wide-band HoloNet message. If he

wanted to announce his presence here he could. There was nobody nearby to pick up the signals, but perhaps some other system in this sector-

His thoughts were broken by a flash of light. A massive spacecrafts had reverted to realspace right on top of him: oblong and curved, with a segmented hull and a small bridge tower atop its humped back. An old Loronar Strike Cruiser, Imperial markings.

A voice crackled over Jag's intercom: "Hapan Miy'til fighter, this is Imperial Strike Cruiser *Wessex*. Please identify yourself."

If Reige was playing some game, it was best to cut to the heart of it. Jag flipped on his speaker. "This is Jagged Fel, former Imperial Head of State. Is Head of State Reige on board?"

There was a long wait before *Wessex* responded. "Our flight deck is currently under repair. We're extending a docking tube. Prepare to board, Mister Fel."

Jag didn't bother to ask his question again. With a sigh, he maneuvered his vessel toward the docking tube extending from the bottom of *Wessex's* hull. If Reige wanted to play cloak-and-dagger, fine. Jag just hoped this was important, and not some elaborate prank.

The Miy'til fighter was not designed for docking on Imperial vessels, and it was an awkward climb out of the docking tube and into the airlock chamber. A half-dozen stormtroopers stood at attention, three on either side. Between them stood Head of State Reige and a more surprising sight: a young Twi'lek female, red head-tails draped over her shoulders, dressed in the black uniform of an Imperial intelligence agent.

"Apologies for sneaking up on you." Reige said as Jag removed his flight helmet and tucked it underarm.

“We were waiting at a distance, to make sure you came alone.”

“I see,” Jag said, though he didn't really, unless Reige really was playing games with him. “I ran thorough sensor checks and detected no ships in the area.”

“*Wessex* has an enhanced sensor system,” the Twi'lek woman spoke with an aristocratic accent that sounded forced. “We could spot you while far outside your sensor range.”

“Well,” Jag looked between them, “I'm happy Imperial R&D hasn't been slouching since I left.”

“Mister Jagged Fel, meet Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor.” Reige said.

“Lieutenant Colonel?” Jag said, extending a hand. “That's very impressive... for one so young.”

“Among other things,” the Twi'lek woman said as she returned a nice, hard shake. Her gold eyes seemed to shine.

Jag withdrew his hand quickly. Young, attractive, and capable lady officers were deadly to a married man.

As Reige led them through the strike cruiser's stark halls, he explained “Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor was brought on to replace Oren Krall last year.”

“Ah, I see,” Jag nodded, slowly understanding. Under Jag's reign, Krall had been in charge of Imperial intelligence regarding the Unknown Regions. He'd spent almost all his time away from Bastion, patrolling the edge of Imperial Space, and had stayed neutral in the conflict between Jag and renegade Admiral Daala two years previous. The two had often butted heads over Jag's reluctance to share Chiss intelligence.

“What happened to Krall, if I may ask?” Jag said.

“He left the service, honorable discharge,” Reige said. “He's working as a consultant for a bank on Muunlist

now. We've had a small wave of senior officers retiring lately."

"Yes, so I've heard." Jag said absently. More than a few old Imperials seemed unhappy with the Empire's recent flirtations with democracy. Jag glanced at Fy'lyor. "So, did Krall recommend you for his replacement?"

"No, sir," she said. "I was selected by Head of State Reige."

"The Lieutenant Colonel here was in charge of certain covert activities under Krall," Reige said awkwardly. "Krall may have been overly conservative in some ways, but he chose his officers according to talent, rather than gender or species. I thought she would be the best being for the job."

"I see," Jag said again, and this time he understood. He'd always suspected Krall was running covert research expeditions into the Unknown Regions, despite Jag's admonitions not to. "Well, I've come a long way and gone through a lot of cloak-and-dagger, so I'd quite like to know what this is all about."

"Of course," Fy'lyor said. "We're nearly there."

A few more turns brought them to a sealed vault-door. Fy'lyor punched her code into its padlock. The door hissed with released pressure and swung open. Jag, Reige, and Fy'lyor stepped inside, leaving the storm-troopers behind.

The chamber was stark, cool, and dark. A few lights flickered on in the center, revealing a set of objects on an elevated platform, walled off in vacuum-sealed transparisteel. Jag walked right up to the platform, but the moment he stepped into the room he knew what it was.

Half a corpse lay on the platform. The whole lower half had been reduced to a cinder and the upper half was scorched and scarred, but even then he could clearly make out the heavy shoulder-pads and broad breastplate made of Vonduun crab armor. The face, already scarred and tattooed, was frozen in dying agony. Around the dead Yuuzhan Vong were a variety of other charred pieces of alien biotechnology. Jag thought one looked like the nose sensor of a coralskipper. Another, coiled up in a corner, was a dead amphistaff.

Jag pressed a hand against the cool transparisteel to steady himself. It had been half a lifetime since he'd seen these things. He thought he never would again.

"You can see the need for security," Reige said. "If anyone even thought the Vong were on the warpath again..."

"I understand," Jag nodded. No, Reige hadn't been playing games. This was deathly serious. "Tell me everything."

"One of my pickets was patrolling the border of Imperial Space when we detected unusual energy signatures. I personally took *Wessex* out to investigate, crossing the border as I did so." Fy'lyor said. "Most of the damage seemed to have been cleaned up beforehand, possibly by a dovin basal, but we recovered these pieces, along with a few others, about a parsec away from the main battle site."

"Who was fighting whom?" Jag asked.

"That is a bit more uncertain," Fy'lyor said. "However, we also recovered the remains of more traditional spacecraft."

"Traditional," Jag said. "Meaning from our galaxy."

“Correct,” she nodded. “That includes several hull fragments, a piece of engine nacelle, a few proton torpedo shells, and the melted-down remains of a turbolaser cannon.”

“No escape pods?”

“No survivors that we could find,” she said. “We’ve identified the turbolaser cannon as a Taim & Bak x-70b model, commonly installed on a number of Alliance warships. The engine nacelle was badly warped and we’re still trying to identify the make, but it seems to be composed of metals most commonly used in Kuat Drive Yards products.”

“You are implying that the Alliance has engaged the Yuuzhan Vong in combat in the Unknown Regions.”

“I’m merely reporting what we know thus far, which isn’t much. It could have been any number of forces. All we know for certain is that it wasn’t ours.”

“Are we certain?” Jag looked at Reige. “I mean, absolutely certain?”

“I’ve been keeping a close eye on Daala and her allies, if that’s what you mean,” Reige said. “This was definitely neither Imperial nor a renegade Imperial force. Somebody else fought the Vong out there, and it wasn’t some unlucky cargo hauler either. This was a warship. Probably more than one.”

“Which means they were hunting for Vong,” Jag said.

“Or trying to probe our flanks, or seeking the Chiss, or any number of reasons,” Fy’lyor said. “At this point we simply need to know more, without spreading alarm.”

Jag looked at Reige. “You asked me because I have friends in high places.”

“Several high places,” Reige nodded. “No response from your friends?”

“Apparently not,” Jag said. “But now that I know something concrete, I’ll send out feelers again. But I can’t predict how they’ll respond.”

“All we ask is that you try,” Reige said. His eyes settled on the charred Yuuzhan Vong corpse. “This has the potential to destabilize the whole galaxy. We need to find out what the Vong are going and stop them. I am willing to work with the Alliance, the Hapans, the Chiss, even the Jedi to get it done.”

“I understand,” Jag nodded gravely. “I’ll start inquiring right away.”

“Discreetly,” said the young woman at his side.

“Discreetly,” Jag agreed. He was already planning his first step.

Chapter 6

They were an odd pair. She was a slim young woman, dressed in the neat navy-blue uniform curiously bereft of rank insignia, clothes curiously incongruous with her long brown hair streaked silver and bright pink. He looked even stranger: a two-meter-high, hundred-fifty-kilo Gamorrean bulging in the same unmarked uniform. The waiting room was otherwise empty, but the office receptionist kept on peeking incredulous glances at them. Pretty strange, Myri thought, that they were supposed to be the commander and executive officer a covert ops unit.

Not that she minded being around Voort, of course. He'd been called 'Piggy' back when he'd flown with her father, three wars and a lifetime ago, but now he just went by Voort SaBinring, retired pilot, retired mathematic professor, now head of the squadron that, in her father and Piggy's time, had been known as Wraiths. She'd only vaguely known Voort before he left teaching to join the reformed Wraiths, and when he returned he'd been closed-off, often outright hostile to the younger pilots, though his experience and technical knowledge were invaluable, even in a group as full of

unique skills as the Wraiths. But he'd begun to thaw, slowly. Sometimes she even saw his big lips curl away from his tusks into something like a smile. Her father had suggested that being with the new pilots made him feel younger.

They sat in the waiting room without talking. They sat for almost an hour, and Myri kept on checking her chrono to make sure. She was, admittedly, not always the punctual person, which was why she was less annoyed and more concerned. The head the Alliance Intelligence usually *was* punctual, so maybe something might have gone wrong.

After about an hour and fifteen minutes of waiting, the receptionist finally looked up from her desk and said, "Director Loran is ready to see you now."

Voort went first, Myri behind him. She could feel the receptionist staring into her back as she went.

The door slid shut behind them with a tight hiss. Garik Loran sat lazily behind his desk, feet propped on top, while Coruscant's traffic ran by in the twilight outside his window. His head was shaved smooth and his trim beard had turned with gray, but somehow he still managed to keep his holostar-good looks.

"Reporting as ordered, sir," Voort said, snapping as crisp a salute as a Gamorrean could. Myri did her own salute, but Loran waved them at ease.

"I'm sorry for the wait," Loran said, rolling some kind of mechanical sphere between his palms. "I just had to finale a few things."

"Oh course, sir," Voort said.

"Oh, relax, Voort," Loran shook his head. "You don't have to call me sir."

Piggy nodded, but didn't relax. Loran looked to Myri and said, "And how are you doing, Antilles the

Younger? How's your father? I haven't talked to him in a while."

"He's doing well, sir. He and mom and enjoying retirement on Corellia."

"About time. He deserves it. We shouldn't have to keep hauling him out of bed every time there's a crisis."

"Is there one now?" Myri asked.

Loran chuckled. It was a brittle chuckle. "That's a good question. That's what we need Wraith Squadron- or whatever you're calling yourselves now- to find out."

"Technically, we don't exist," said Voort. "So you might as well call us Nothing Squadron."

"Nothing Squadron?" Loran cocked an eyebrow. "That's worse than Dinner or Silly Squadron."

"I don't know," said Myri, "I kind of like it. Has a certain mysterious quality to it."

"Well, whatever you're calling or not calling yourselves doesn't matter right now," Face kept rolling the sphere between his hands. "The point is, there's something you need to investigate. We've received reports from certain friends in foreign places that a battle took place in the Unknown Regions, near the border with Imperial Space, about five days ago."

"Between what parties?" Voort asked.

Loran took a deep breath and pressed a button on his metal sphere. A blue holo-image sprung up in front of them, showing a wide, flat table with wreckage laid across it. She leaned in for a closer look and felt something sink in her gut. She'd never seen one in person, but had heard plenty of stories and seen plenty of holo-documentaries. She heard Voort suck in breath beside her.

“The Yuuzhan Vong,” Loran nodded. “Further, we’ve been informed other wreckage, retrieved from the site, indicate vessels are Alliance origin, or at least those using military-grade equipment produced by KDY and Tam & Baik. We’re sending your squadron out there to try and track down either of those fleets. Someone is fighting a war with the Vong out there and we need to find out everything we can about them. We don’t want this war to spill out into the known parts of the galaxy. We don’t even want word of it to get out, at all. The panic would be unthinkable and potentially dangerous.”

Myri looked at Voort, then back at Loran. They had both fought in the Vong War, and lost people dear to them. Their eyes were dark and cold.

“Have we tried contacting Zonama Sekot?” Myri asked. Voort still looked cold. Loran looked away. She said, “We *can* contact them, right? We *do* know where it is, don’t we?”

Loran gave a long, long sigh as he turned off the holo. “Antilles, you’ve just stumbled onto the second-most-important secret in the galaxy.”

“That we’ve lost all contact with Zonama Sekot?”

He nodded.

“And what’s the first-most-important secret?”

“Where it is now, obviously.” Voort said.

Loran nodded. “I’m afraid we lost contact with Zonama Sekot shortly before the Corellian crisis started. At first we thought it was some kind of mechanical malfunction- energy storms blocking the transmission or something- but when we sent scouts to its last recorded location, Zonama Sekot had vanished. We were investigating its whereabouts, but when the crisis started, those resources were needed elsewhere.”

“So a planetful of Yuuzhan Vong has been wandering the universe for five years now, and nobody knows where it is?” Voort sounded angry.

Loran nodded. “Information we've kept quiet, for obvious reasons. My predecessor wasn't exactly the most exemplary of leaders, so he didn't try to fix this problem even during peacetime. Now it's something we can no longer ignore.”

“Okay,” Myri said. “So we're hunting for a rogue planet, as well as two phantom fleets, in a huge uncharted region of space. Sounds like fun.”

“And there's more,” Loran said. “You're going to be working in conjunction with Imperial Intelligence.”

“Imperial Intelligence?” Voort growled. “Are you sure that's a good idea, sir?”

“I'm not crazy about it, but you'll be working directly with our source of information in this case. It's someone I trust implicitly,” His eyes flicked to Myri and lingered, only for a moment. “We'll be sharing information all the way. If the Vong are back on the warpath, it's a threat to us both.”

“And this other fleet?” Voort asked. “If they're fighting the Vong, are we to consider them a threat as well?”

“On that you'll have to use your digression, but I want you to investigate carefully and be pragmatic. If some-one's intentionally trying to start a war with the Vong, then they're to be considered enemies and dealt with as such. Understood?”

Loran and Voort stared at each other for a moment. Then the Gamorrean nodded. “Understood. Sir.”

“Very good,” said Loran. He looked to Myri. “This is going to be an investigation, not the vanguard for a new war. You're to avoid combat if at all possible.”

"Understood," Myri said.

Loran tossed the holo-sphere to Myri, who awkwardly caught it against her chest.

He said, "That also contains the time and location for your rendezvous with your Imperial counterparts. You're to only take your fighters. They'll be providing the capital ship that will serve as your base of operations during the expedition."

"I'm still not confident about working with the Imperials," Voort said. "Our squadron contains a talking Gamorrean, a Clawdite, and even a Yuuzhan Vong. Do you think the Imperials are going to be happy to work with us?"

"If you're worried about anti-alien prejudice, our contact personally assures me that that issue will be under control."

"Do they now?" Voort grunted. "So is the Empire finally becoming democratic and pluralistic?"

"Stranger things have happened." Loran shrugged. "Thought I can't think of any off the top of my head."

"Maybe my cousin really is a reformer," Myri crossed her arms over her chest. "I'll have to thank him personally once we see him."

Loran's eyes went wide. "How did you know?" Then he laughed, shook his head. "Lucky guess."

"Well, there's not that many Alliance sympathizers working with the Empire," Myri said, "Are there?"

Loran tapped his lips. "Need to know, Antilles."

"Of course," Myri rolled her eyes.

"What about the other fleet?" Voort asked. "You say the wreckage indicates Alliance construction?"

"Possibly. While you're gone, that's what my home team is going to be working on. We'll be scouring every ship registry we can find, trying to locate any

indication that a large capital ship with KDY engines has gone missing.”

“It’s a big galaxy,” Voort said. “It’s full of old ships, even big ones that have fallen off people’s radars. Alliance, Imperial, Hapan, Corporate Sector, even Old Republic...”

“I know, which is why this investigation is going to take time. Hopefully two teams ferreting out information in two different ways can lead us to one important conclusion.” Loran leaned forward and folded his hands atop his desk, almost looking professional. “Everything you need to know is in that data-sphere. Antilles, it’s to stay on your person at all times. I want you to keep information restricted until you’re at the rendezvous point. Don’t tell the other Wraiths- or Nothings, Dinners, whatever- any details about the mission until you’re far away from Coruscant.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good. Dismissed. Now get ready, you’re shipping out tomorrow afternoon.”

“We understand, sir.” Voort said, and snapped his best salute. Myri awkwardly shifted the data-sphere to her left hand and did the same. Loran nodded and said, “All right, good luck. And be safe.”

“We will,” Voort nodded as he let down his salute. “I’ll get everyone home.”

“I hope so,” Loran nodded gravely, and something passed between them. Some old veteran thing, Myri was sure. “Dismissed.”

Five minutes later they were riding the turbolift down to the transit platform. Neither could think of anything to say. The dataglobe felt heavy in Myri’s pocket. When the turbolift jerked to a halt, they walked down

the hall at a brisk pace, past dozens of soldiers, officers, clerks, and droids who had no idea that the galaxy might be on the verge of another Yuuzhan Vong invasion. In covert ops you got used to knowing things 'normal people' didn't, but suddenly it drove home the gravity of the situation. As they walked, Voort said in a low voice, "We'll call up the Wraiths when we get back to base. I'll take everyone out to a cantina."

"You?" Myri stared. Voort wasn't the partying type.

"They'll need a fun send-off," Voort said. "A last hurrah."

Myri nodded gravely and got her attention ahead of her. As they approached the exit to the landing bay, a woman walked briskly past her. She caught the flash of bronze hair balled into a ponytail, a sharp nose, and cool blue eyes. Myri's hand jerked out and grabbed her by the arm, half-spinning the woman to face her in the middle of the corridor.

"Myri!" Syal gaped at her younger sister. "What are you doing here?"

"Confidential," Myri grinned. "What's up with you?"

Syal jerked her arm away and stiffened. "Something pretty similar."

"Everybody seems busy nowadays," Myri's eyes darted up and down her sister's uniform. "Hey, those bars look new. When did they make you a fleet captain?"

"Four months ago," Syal avoided Myri's eyes.

"Oh, right, I think dad mentioned it. So what, does my big sister have her own ship now?"

"I've been stationed at Fondor," she said. "Mostly overseeing supply and asset tracking."

"Oh, okay. Well, welcome back to Coruscant."

Syal nodded, once.

“Hey, listen, I’m going to be leaving tomorrow. You know how it is with ultra-top-secret spy stuff, really exciting. I don’t know when I’ll make it back, but we’re having a meet-up tonight, all us Wraiths. Or Nothings, or whatever we are now. You want to come?”

Syal shook her head. “Sorry, I’m busy. You know how it is.”

“Yeah,” Myri forced a smile. “I sure do. See you later then.”

“Later,” Syal nodded, and quickly walked away. Myri watched her back until it turned a corner and disappeared. Then she remembered the big Gamorrean standing at her side.

“Hey Voort, you don’t have siblings, do you?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“It’s probably simpler that way.” Myri blew out a long sigh. “Well, whatever. Let’s have fun tonight, right?”

“Yes,” said the stolid Gamorrean. “Fun.”

When Loran finally finished, Syal Antilles didn’t know what to say.

She stood in front of his desk, hands clasped in front of her, staring at him but through him, through the transparisteel of his window, through the skyscrapers turning aglow as the light in the sky went down.

She felt sick to her gut, and it took all her military training not to let it show. But Loran had known her since she was a child, and he saw through her with ease.

Frowning, he asked, “Can you do this, Commander?”

She blinked and tried to focus on the man in front of her. “I’ll do whatever mission you give me, sir.”

Loran shook his head and leaned forward, hands clasped on his desk, looking uncharacteristically

serious. "Syal, technically it's not my mission to give. I went to Admiral Bwa'tu for this and got his special permission to borrow the services of Naval Intelligence. I figure they'd have better resources for this than civilian intel."

"I understand that, sir. If anyone has the resources to track down a fleet of missing ships, it's Naval Intelligence. I've spent months at Fondor overseeing asset tracking so I'm familiar with their systems."

"I know. That's why I chose you."

"Is that the only reason, sir?"

"You know it's not. Call it nepotism if you want, but I'm not just choosing you because of your father, just like I'm not sending Voort out there because he's my friend. You're people I know and I trust your professional abilities."

"Are you sure I'm the one you want, sir?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to talk yourself out of a job, Captain?"

"No, sir. It's just that this seems to be a very important mission."

"That's putting it mildly. If we can figure out where this renegade fleet came from, we can figure out who is behind it and, I very much hope, put a stop to it before it starts another Yuuzhan Vong war."

"It's a heavy responsibility, sir. I'm honored."

"And intimidated?"

"I didn't fight the Vong, sir. I was too young for that. I remember being on Borleias during the seige, and I remember the fall of Coruscant, but I never actually saw action against them."

"I know. Your job is to see you, and everybody else your age or younger, never has to."

She looked down at his desk and didn't say anything.

Loran exhaled. “Talk to me, Syal. Not as your boss. Talk to me as Face, the family friend. I’m trying to do you a favor. Since the end of the war you’ve been stuck on asset tracking jobs and captaining picket patrols. And you’ve seemed *content* with it. To be frank, that doesn’t seem like the young lady who enrolled in the Academy under a false name and clawed her way up to a captain’s rank without any laurels to help her up.”

“That captain’s rank came from Jacen Solo, sir. He gave it to me during the Battle of Centerpoint.” She couldn’t bring herself to call him ‘Face,’ or to look him in the eyes. “That wasn’t exactly a mark for promotion in the new administration.”

“But you got one anyway.”

She shrugged lightly. “The chief asset tracker at Fondor retired. They needed a new one.”

Loran gave a little sigh. “This is about Tiom, isn’t it?”

She looked down at her hands. It had been four years since he died at Balmorra, and she still hadn’t forgotten the rough, warm feeling of her fiancé’s fingers interlocking with her own.

“It’s a sad thing to say, but losing people we care about comes with the life we lead.”

“Please sir,” She exhaled sharply, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Loran held up both hands and leaned back in his chair. “Syal, I’m not going to force you to take this job. It’s a critical position, and if we end up having to send a full task force into the Unknown Regions, well, you’re very likely to be at the front of it. So there’s a lot of responsibility, and a lot of risk. But someone has to do it and I honestly believe it should be you.”

He put a little steel in his voice. "So please, let me know now, because I can't wait for you to resolve your personal problems. Will you help me find this renegade fleet, or will you go back to Fondor and count shuttles for the next twenty years?"

He made her feel like a chastened child. She straightened her shoulders and said, "I'll take your offer, sir."

"Very good." Loran nodded and rose from his chair. "In that case, let me go fetch a pot of caf."

"Sir?" she blinked.

"I said we don't have time to waste and I meant it. Get ready for a very long night."

Viull Gorsat, commonly called 'Scut,' tried to have fun. He almost succeeded.

The Wraiths (as they still called themselves informally, lacking any other good agreed-on designation) had chosen to descend on a pub called the Ricochet, which was neither a fine officer's club near Intel headquarters nor a broken-down, crime-infested dive in the lower levels. It was a middle-of-the-road place, chosen as to accommodate the varied tastes of the Wraiths.

The ale was good enough, but the air was warm. Scut's skin felt sticky beneath the masquer he wore and he wanted to rip it off, but he knew the others in the pub wouldn't not react calmly if a Yuzzhan Vong suddenly appeared in their midst.

The vat-grown organism clung to the pores of his real skin, creating a second layer that gave him the appearance of a bland-looking normal human. His forehead was lowered and hair added to his scalp. A slightly-hooked nose was piled on top of his flat nostrils. Thicker lips formed around teeth that, along

with his eyes, were the only parts of his true body visible to the outside world.

Scut had been born part of the Shamed Ones, now considered Extolled, but had been raised from childhood by a family of eccentric scientists. He'd followed the path of his human parents into the fields of exobiology and genetic engineering, and that, just as much as his Yuuzhan Vong blood was why Scut was here now, even if he didn't have much first-hand memory of his people.

After an entire life of living and working alongside the 'normal' people the galaxy, he was almost used to hiding in a second skin, but not quite.

As he hunched over the counter and sipped his drink, he looked around the Ricochet and tried to track the other Wraiths. Turman Durra, former actor and Clawdite master of disguise, was standing in a corner with human demo expert Trey Courser. They were putting the charm on a pair of unfamiliar women. Myri Antilles, who had donned a slinky dress and added even more highlights to her hair, was not talking with a young man her age, as Scut expected, but with Sharr Latt, the squadron's other executive officer. In another booth sat Jesmin Tainer, ex-Antarian Ranger, communications expert Thaymes Fordrick, weapons specialist Wran Narcassan, and Devaronian medic Drikall Bessarah, and they all looked fairly drunk.

Finally, also perched on the bar but far more conspicuous than a masqueraded Yuuzhan Vong, was Wookiee quartermaster Huhunna and Gamorrean squad leader, Voort 'Piggy' SaBinring. Every non-Wraith in the pub was eying the unlikely pair and trying not to be obvious about it. Scut found the whole scene amusing, but maybe that was the ale talking.

At some point Huhunna left SaBinring alone. The Gamorrean saw Scut hunched over the counter just a few meters away. Their eyes met in the pub's dim lighting but neither moved. When SaBinring had rejoined the Wraiths, his reaction to Scut had been harsh to say the least, even compared to other veterans of the Yuuzhan Vong war that Scut had known. In time, SaBinring had come to accept him, and their relationship now was one of professional trust, but not friendship.

For a reason he could not explain, Scut picked up his drink, walked over to SaBinring, and took the spot the Wookiee had just vacated. He took a drink and then asked the first thing to come to his head.

"What do you think would happen if I took off my masquer?"

SaBinring's little eyes blinked. "I wouldn't if I were you."

"Well, why not? I might as well join the freak show."

It was exactly the wrong thing to say. SaBinring snorted angrily. "I'm not a freak. Neither are you."

"I hope so," Scut sighed. He usually tried not to dwell on his heritage, but tonight was particularly unsuccessful. By now the other Wraiths accepted the man behind the masquer, but that afternoon, as Myri and SaBinring briefed the squadron on their upcoming mission, he could feel their awkward, half-hidden glances.

"You don't have to worry about my loyalties," he said.

"I wasn't," SaBinring said. Scut looked at him, trying to tell if he was being nice or actually truthful, but that animal Gamorrean face was as unreadable as ever.

A Wookiee hollered in one corner of the pub and every head turned to look. Huhunna was standing in a corner with Shar Latt waving one long shaggy arm. SaBinring took it as a beckon and excused himself as gracefully as a massive Gamorrean could, leaving Scut at the bar alone again. That was fine, he thought, though as he took another drink he wondered where Myri had gone off to.

He got his answer a second later. The young woman appeared next to him and called for another drink. Myri Antilles was a party girl, supposedly to the chagrin of her venerated parents, but tonight she was not dragging a trail of male admirers. Once she got a drink she took a sip, put it on the counter, leaned forward with elbows on the formica top and bare shoulders hunched. Finally, she looked at Scut.

"You hanging in there?" she asked with a tired smile.

"Always," Scut said. "How are you?"

"Peachy," she said. "It's going to be a hell of a mission, isn't it? Probably the most important we've ever done."

"Probably," Scut said. He couldn't think of anything that came close. Busting crooked Alliance admirals was child's play compared to hunting down two renegade fleets trying to restart the most deadly war in galactic history.

"Do you have any siblings, Scut?" she asked.

"Two," he said. "Human, of course."

She nodded. "Do you get along with them?"

"As much as anyone gets along with their siblings. We had ups and downs. But they treated me well, considering."

Myri sighed. "Syal and I... We were always different. Syal was more like mom and dad. She was always

about duty, and proving herself, and being a good little soldier. I always wanted to see her lighten up. She had a nice guy, Tiom, and she started smiling a lot more. I was happy for her."

From her tone, Scut could tell there wasn't going to be a happy ending. "What happened?"

"He died," she said. "At Balmorra."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, so am I. Lot of good any of that does Syal." Myri sighed again. "I just want to help my sister. That's the mature, grown-up thing to say, isn't it? It doesn't matter how much we fought growing up. I want to help her now."

"Skate, why are you telling me this?"

"That's why I want to come back," she said. "That and, y'know, saving the galaxy and making mom and dad proud and all that. But mostly, I want to see Syal smile again."

"That's a good reason," Scut said, and meant it.

He wasn't sure what he was hoping for from this mission. Saving the galaxy and parental adoration were good, yes, but he wanted something more too. He wanted to prove something, though he wasn't exactly sure what he wanted to prove, or who he'd prove it to. Whatever the reason, though, a sudden weight had settled on his shoulders since this afternoon's briefing. It felt like his entire strange life had been leading to this great leap into the unknown.

Myri was watching him intently. The masquer clinging tight to his skin betrayed his emotions almost as if it were his real face. Their eyes met, briefly, and a smile came to her face. She picked up her glass and clinked it against his.

“Cheer up, Scut. All we have to do is save the galaxy and solve our stupid personal *poodoo*,” she grinned. “How hard could it be?”

He had to smile back, but his heart wasn't in it.

Part II: You Can't Go Home Again

Chapter 7

Ben and Tahiri were lucky. The ship they'd stolen had a first aid kit.

They were, objectively, more lucky not to have died, or to have broken any major bones or punctured any organs when their Y-wing crashed nose-first into a sand dune. They still ended up with all manner of minor injuries, and injuries that didn't feel all that minor but weren't life-threatening either, so long as your ship had some bacta patches and bandages stored away under the co-pilot's seat.

After using up everything in the kit, Ben had joked they looked halfway to joining the Tusken Raiders. Tahiri reminded him, grimly that, Tuskens never showed any skin whatsoever except to their mates after the marriage ceremony. She had fared the better of the two, though she had bandages wrapped around her forehead and another around the nasty swelling bruise on her right cheek. Ben had the whole left side of his face wrapped up, including the eye, which left him with bad depth perception. His left hand was in a split, which at least left him with the right hand to hold a lightsaber, datapad, or food rations.

At least, he could have, if they'd had food rations. That part had been unlucky. Even worse, they had no water either. And finally, worst of all, the heavy Y-wing had sunken deep into the sand before they could pull out its transceiver array and call for help. Which meant they were stranded, alone, in the Dune Sea of Tatooine, with no supplies and no hope of rescue.

At least their wounds wouldn't get infected.

Despite the dire situation, they knew from the start what to do. Once the bandages were set they'd begun marching north across the dunes, to the source of the lonely narrow pillar of black smoke that rose steadily into the sky.

They tried not to talk much as they walked. Better to conserve moisture, Tahiri said. The sky was hot and savage. Ben felt like his clothes were going to burn off his back. The path across the Dune Sea was treacherous, and Tahiri led them in curving paths through the troughs of the dunes, never atop them, because those were the places where the sand was mostly likely to open up under you and swallow you whole. The footing was steadier in the troughs, and when the suns started to set you might even find yourself in a patch of shade. Wherever they were, though, it was still a few hours to sunset, so that relief wouldn't be coming any time soon.

Walking through the troughs of the dunes, it seemed like the desert spread out forever. Ben's father had told him countless times about the legendary Dune Sea. He'd spoken of the vastness of it, the loneliness of it, and about the fleeting splendor of two suns rising and setting over a landscape of pure and empty white. Ben had tried to picture it, sometimes, but never quite managed. Tahiri was right; living on places like

Coruscant robbed you of the opportunity to appreciate natural beauty.

Not that Ben appreciated the beauty much right now. The sun was scorching hot, and he could almost feel the moisture leaving his body. Their only hope was to march to the other crash site and hope that Cloakshape was not only in better condition than their Y-wing, but also well-stocked with food and water. The girl they were pursuing seemed almost secondary at this point.

So they walked, on and on, winding around the big dunes, always guided by the trail of inky smoke. It was only when they drew close that Ben saw something other than smooth lines of sand. He spotted gold-brown rocks, jagged and jutting up toward the sky. Tahiri, under her breath, told him that was good, because rocks sometimes collected moisture, and they didn't generate heat the same way sand did. He quickly found out that rocks, even uneven ones like these, were far easier to walk on than the dunes. When they found solid ground they took shelter in the closest shade they could find.

They didn't rest for long. They still needed water, badly.

By the time they got close to the crash site the suns were starting to set, and shadows were stretching out from the low rocky hills. Ben mentioned this with relief, but Tahiri warned him against that too.

"When the suns go down Tatooine gets cold, very cold. We're going to need some kind of shelter if we don't want to freeze to death."

"Great," said Ben. "Really great. "This little crashed fighter is going to have everything we need, right? I mean, how could it not?"

Tahiri hadn't dignified his sarcasm with a response.

When they finally found the crashed ship, Ben was too exhausted to be disappointed. He was, however, dimly surprised to find the thing mostly in tact. It had settled at the bottom of a crevice. Both wings had been torn off, but the main fuselage containing the cockpit, engines, and cargo pad remained intact, albeit covered with scars and indentations. The cargo hold was popped open and empty. So was the cockpit. In fact, the girl seemed to have intentionally blasted every inch of the control panels and equipment into oblivion. She clearly didn't want anyone snooping in her equipment.

"What do we do now?" Ben asked. His throat was so dry it hurt to talk. His skin was still damp with sweat, but now the cool breezes of early night were blowing. He was already starting to shiver.

Tahiri looked so dazed he didn't now if she'd heard. But talking hurt, and he waited before repeating the question. Eventually Tahiri looked at him and said, "We find some shelter."

"What kind of shelter?" Ben croaked.

"Caves," she said. "Might be water pooled there. Condensation."

"Great." Ben wrapped his arms around himself. He shivered again. "Getting cold."

Tahiri nodded. She took one last look at the fighter and said, "I'll check one more time. There might be something we can use as a heater."

Ben watched her hobble over the rocks and inspect the wreckage once more. Still hugging himself, he looked skyward. The suns had dipped below the rocks by now, but he could see a dark gold sky, with violet highlights on the thin streaks of clouds high overhead. Feeling at once bored, restless, and dimly angry, he

swung back his foot and kicked some of the rocks around him.

Tahiri's head shot up.

"Sorry about that," Ben said. "That was me."

Tahiri held up a hand. Ben shut up. She listened. He listened too, but didn't hear anything except the wind whistling through the rocks. Eventually Tahiri shook her head and resumed checking the fighter.

Suddenly a cry rose up and filled the air. Ben spun around, trying to find the source of the horrible noise. It seemed to echo off every rock, coming from every place and no place at once. It seemed to grow louder, more cacophonous. He couldn't tell if it was twenty echoes or twenty individual cries. Dazed and confused, he didn't see Tahiri until she had bounded up to his position and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Tuskens!" she said. "They're here!"

"Where?" Ben still looked around. He felt empty inside and dizzy. "I don't see 'em."

"Come on, Ben!" Tahiri snapped with ragged strength. "We have to go! Now!"

But it was already too late. Suddenly they were everywhere, at the crest of every rock. Each one was wrapped in ragged sand-colored robes and each one held its gaffi stick high overhead with both hands. Each one was howling something, Ben didn't know what, but it sounded like a feral declaration of triumph.

Ben hand's found his lightsaber. He was about to ignite it when Tahiri's hand clamped down on his wrist. He tried to jerk free of her vice-grip but failed. When he looked at her she shook her head, grimly. Then she turned to face the Tuskens, took a deep, deep breath, and shouted. It sounded so savage and volatile Ben couldn't believe it had come from her throat. She kept

shouting, again and again, until suddenly she was the only one shouting, and all the Tusksens had stopped. Tahiri's voice cracked and she sagged against Ben, head lowered, finally silent. The Tusksens were silent too. They had lowered their gaffi sticks but remained on their rocky perches like looming sentinels. The wind howled faintly. Nobody moved.

Suddenly one appeared in front of them. He hadn't made any sound at all, but there he was, a massive cloaked figure, face covered in between an alien war-mask and a collection of rags. He made ugly, grunting sounds once more, but at least this time he wasn't shouting.

Tahiri wearily looked up. She said something, Ben had no idea what. She sagged heavier against him, like she was on the verge of passing out.

The Tusken turned and shouted again, this time to his men. They moved from their perches, swarming down into the shadowy valley. Ben's grip tightened on his lightsaber, but with some incredibly strength Tahiri tightened her clasp on his wrist. He looked at her as her head lolled against his shoulder, green eyes struggling to stay open. She said, "It's okay."

Okay? They were surrounded by savages and both close to exhaustion. It didn't look okay.

"We're okay," Tahiri repeated. "They're.... friends...."

Then she passed out in his arms.

When she woke up, they were in a cave. The air was cold, and smelled dimly of burnt kindling. She was wrapped in a blanket and laid down on the flattest part of the cave floor, but it was still very uncomfortable. Her back ached, though that could have been from the crash, or the terrible trek across the dunes.

The light in the cave was dim, but she could make out a cluster of Tusken surrounding the dim flickering of a fire. She struggled to sit up, and ended up propping herself with her elbows.

“Hey,” she heard Ben's soft voice beside her. “You're awake.”

She nodded, and felt Ben slip an arm under her shoulder. With his help she was able to sit up completely. She looked to her side to see him squat down beside her. He handed her an old metal canteen, which she eagerly took. The water felt amazing going down, and she was tempted to empty the whole thing without stopping, but childhood instinct kicked in quickly. Never take more water than you need on Tatooine; you never know when it will run out.

So reluctantly she slipped the cap back on the canteen and handed it to Ben. The teenager placed it on the ground between them.

“Lucky I had you along,” Ben said. “Otherwise I'd be dead.”

“Yeah,” Tahiri nodded. “Lucky. How long was I out?”

“A couple of hours. I bet they want to talk with you.”

“I bet they do.”

“What did you tell them? Are they your.... old clan?”

Tahiri shook her head. If only it were that simple. “I claimed something. Call it the Right of Protection.”

“Right of Protection? What the blazes does that mean?”

Tahiri was too tired to try and explain the elaborate customs of Tusken inter-tribal relations to Ben. She said, “We're okay now. That's all that matters.”

“Is it? I mean, my Dad used to tell me stories about these guys... Guys and girls... Whatever.”

"I used to be one of them," Tahiri said. "I can still speak their language. Mostly, anyway. We're both outlanders, Ben, and they don't like outlanders, but the fact that I can speak Tusken earns me special privileges."

"Like not being impaled by a dozen gaffi sticks?"

She gave him a tired smile. "Exactly."

"So can you explain that you grew up Tusken? Wouldn't that give you, I don't know, honorary-Tusken rights?"

"I'm not Tusken any more, that's all that counts. I've been a lot of things, Ben. Tusken, Jedi, Yuuzhan Vong hybrid, Sith, bounty hunter." She sighed and looked at her hands. The skin was dry and cracked. "I can never seem to keep a job, can I?"

"You're still a Jedi," Ben said firmly.

Tahiri smiled against herself. Ben had brought her back from the Dark Side, even forgiven her after she had accidentally killed his friend and mentor Lon Shevu. He had been trained by Darth Caedus from the age of fourteen and come back to the Light stronger than ever. Deep down he seemed to have the straightforward, honesty purity of his father, though his upbringing had been far more dramatic than that of a Tatooine farmboy. Most of the time it seemed like he was the older, more mature member of their team. Most of the time.

When she didn't respond, he said, "You should ask them about the crashed ship. If this is their territory they might have been where the pilot went."

"Maybe they already killed her," Tahiri suggested.

Ben swallowed and nodded.

"Well, it's time to find out either way," Tahiri said and tried to rise. With Ben's help she got to her feet,

though instead of leaning on his weight she shifted away. "Stay back, Ben. I don't want to show weakness."

"Oh. Okay," Ben said, and let her walk ahead, though his expression was one of confusion. So like Ben, Tahiri thought. Civilized to the core.

The circle of Tusken had been watching them in silence this whole time. When Tahiri walked into their circle she could over a dozen pairs of glassed-off eye-tubes watching her, reflecting the flicking crimson of the fire. None of them made a sound until she sat down cross-legged in the middle of the circle.

"Thank you again for saving us," Tahiri said in Tusken.

She hadn't spoken it in well over a decade, and was amazed how easily her birth tongue came back to her. The language and grammar, at least. She knew her vocalizations must sound funny to their ears, but it was what they'd have expected from one of the *chuta ootlanders*- foreigners trained to interact with Tusken tribes. Most *chuta ootlanders* were trained by the Hutts, or by the local governments. A few were anthropologists from offworld universities doing research. They were rare, and not well-liked by the Tusken, but they were tolerated because of the influence they seemed to wield in Tusken eyes. Bringing hurt to a *chuta ootlander* could bring swift and lethal revenge from the Hutt syndicates or the government, and it wasn't until Tahiri had left Tatooine behind that she realized that *chuta ootlanders* were usually middling functionaries instead of important *ootlander* leaders.

So now Tahiri tried to play the part. She sat stiff-backed, despite still feeling woozy. She looked around the circle, pausing momentarily on each wrapped-up

face, as though she could peer into each pair of glass-topped tubes and see the eyes beneath.

"Why did you come to the territory of the Red Bantha Clan, *chuta ootlander*?" asked one of them. He might have been the one she spoke with briefly before passing out, but she couldn't be sure. She remembered hearing of a Red Bantha Clan, and tried to place it geographically. The Tusken tribes were semi-nomadic, and the Red Banthas could have moved thousands of kilometers since she had grown up with the Long Dragon Tribe, but it was a place to start.

"We came in pursuit of the woman whose spaceship crashed here," she said after a moment's thought. "She is a dangerous criminal."

A few Tusken laughed. It was a harsh choking sound. A second Tusken said, "Why should we care about *ootlander* law?"

"You have no reason to," Tahiri acquiesced. "However, as I said, she is dangerous. She already killed one person today, and many more besides." It was true, likely enough. Her execution of Traygo had seemed the work of a professional. "She is probably hiding in these hills somewhere, and it would be very dangerous if you were to run into her unprepared."

A few Tusken looked at each other. Their gazes seem to linger, as though they could peer through the masks and into one another's faces.

"Is there something I don't know?" Tahiri asked. "Is there something you should tell me?"

The lead Tusken said, "The *ootlander* you seek is not here."

"Not here," Tahiri repeated. "Did you kill her?"

"No," the Tusken grunted. "She left."

"Left? Left where?"

“She went out across the Dune Sea,” he said. “She took provisions from her ship and walked out across the desert. The girl is a fool. She has probably been swallowed by the sand by now.”

“Can you point us the direction where she went?” If you do, we’ll leave right away and not bother you again.”

The Tusken exchanged a few more knowing glances. Then one said, “We will show you in the morning.”

“If she’s moving across the desert, we can’t afford to wait,” Tahiri insisted. “We have to catch up to her as soon as possible.”

“These hills are unsafe at night,” Another Tusken said gravely.

Tahiri felt an old, familiar shiver, “Krayt Dragons?”

None of them responded, but what was enough affirmation. She sighed inwardly and said, “We will rest tonight, but will require your assistance the moment the sun rises.”

“Very well,” the lead Tusken said. “In the meantime, you are welcome to claim the privileges of the *chuta ootlander*, including food and water.”

“Thank you very much,” Tahiri said. “We greatly appreciate it.”

She slowly rose to her feet. All the Tusken watched her as she did so. She felt awkward as she moved out of the ring, slipping between two Tusken who hadn’t spoken during her debriefing. As she began to walk toward a tired but expectant Ben, she heard the Tusken leader ask her, “Are you a Jedi?”

Tahiri spun around. All of them still stared at her with goggles that gleamed in the firelight.

The leader asked again, “Are you a Jedi? We saw your companion holding a long metal cylinder before.

He did not light it, but we have seen those weapons before.”

“Have you now?” Tahiri's throat felt drier than ever.

“There is one story passed down by the White Bantha Clan, and another by the Blue Sky Clan. Would you like to hear them?”

Tahiri ran through the names of the new tribes, trying to tell if they were familiar. She couldn't remember, not in her current state. She walked back into the circle, resumed her cross-legged position, and said, “I'd like to hear, yes.”

“Among the White Banthas,” he said, “There is a story of a man who a sword made of light. He lived in the desert, all alone. If nobody bothered him, he would not both anyone. But if somebody did bother him, he would set that glowing sword ablaze. Even if disturbed, though, he would not kill. He would disarm his enemy, confuse them, or render them helpless, but he would never kill. He was a warrior whose very presence brought peace.”

“I see,” Tahiri said. Now she remembered; the White Banthas had dwelt in the desert around Anchorhead, skirting around the edges of the Jundland Wastes. Based on the stories she had heard from Master Skywalker, this peace-bringing hermit must have been Obi-Wan Kenobi, who had kept watch over the heir of Darth Vader for two decades from his humble hut in the desert.

“The Blue Sky Clan has a very different story,” the Tusken said. “And this one is not just a story. This one is history, because its story has been repeated in many other clans.”

“Please, tell me,” Tahiri said. She thought back to her own childhood, trying to recall other Jedi stories. She

had known about Jedi when Master Skywalker came to take her offworld; she remembered that much. But they had seemed like vague phantoms, legends, nothing like the history this Tusken purported to tell.

He said, "There once was a man from offworld, and *ootlander* with a blazing green sword who came to the desert to live the life of the Tusken. He married a Tusken woman, learned our language and customs, and became leader of his clan. He used his blazing sword to fight for the Blue Sky Clan, and sometimes to kill. Under his banner, the Blue Sky became the greatest clan on Tatooine, feared even by the Hutts.

"That was his downfall, of course. Even the bravest Jedi and the truest Tusken was no match for that army of *ootlander* scum. In the end he was killed, and the Blue Sky clan scattered. It was through his scattering that his story was passed on."

"I see," Tahiri said. "I'm... surprised I never heard that story."

Or perhaps she had, long ago, and simply lost it in the fog of childhood memory. Ever since her return to Tatooine she felt like she was moving through some mist, trying to gain solid ground on a world she'd left behind several lifetimes ago. Bounty hunter, Sith, Yuuzhan Vong, Jedi, and Tusken at the very start. She felt far away from all of them, but Tusken most of all, and coming back to Tatooine had made her feel more alienated from her past than ever.

"That is not the end of the story," the Tusken leader said. "The great Tusken Jedi was slain, but his son survived."

"His son?" Tahiri asked.

"His son, who was taken offworld to be trained by these Jedi."

"I see," Tahiri considered. "Do you have the name of these Jedi? Do you know how long ago they lived? It's.... possible I could learn what happened to him, though I can't make any promises."

"His name was A'Sharad Hett, son of Sharad Hett, and we know what happened to him," the leader said firmly. "He came back."

"You mean he rejoined the Tuskens?"

"He did, and he fought more valiantly than even his father. He killed *ootlanders* by the dozen, and made them fear us."

He sounded like a Jedi gone dark, a Jedi who had surrendered the lofty rules of the Order for the more base and violent life of the Tuskens. She asked, "What happened to A'Sharad Hett?"

"He disappeared," the voice sounded grim. "We do not know where he went. Some say he was slain, and buried in secret. Others say he was captured by the Hutts, or by the *ootlanders*. One story, most curiously, says he was confronted by the hermit Jedi from the first story. They fought, and A'Sharad Hett lost one of his hands."

"It takes two hands to hold a gaderfi," Tahiri recited the old Tusken standard.

The leader nodded. "And so we left Tatooine behind. No longer a Jedi, no longer a Tusken, he wandered the stars in lonely exile, never to find a place he could call home."

The thought rang close to home. Tahiri shuddered. "That does not sound like a happy story."

"From what we have heard from other *chuta ootlanders*, Jedi stories rarely end well."

"That's not true," Tahiri said, but she wasn't sure she believed it.

“So tell us again, *chuta ootlander*,” the Tusken leaned forward with intent, “Are you or are you not a Jedi? And if you are, do you bring peace or war?”

“We don’t bring war,” Tahiri shook her head.

“But you do not bring peace either,” another Tusken said.

“We just want to find this woman and return her to the stars, where she cannot harm anyone ever again,” Tahiri insisted.

“We believe you, *chuta ootlander*,” the leader said, “But you have not answered our question. Are you or are you not Jedi?”

Tahiri stared at that blank face, at those flame-bright slips of glass that hid its eyes. A long, long time ago these faces had seemed as natural as her own. Now she understood how terrifying the outlanders found them.

“You were right.” She gestured to Ben, slumped half-asleep against the cave wall. “He is a Jedi.”

None of the Tusken reacted. The leader, still staring at her, asked, “And what are you?”

“Me?” Tahiri ran a hand down her trousers, palm resting on the ridge of the lightsaber tucked into her pocket. “I’m sorry, but no. I’m no Jedi. I... wish I could be. But I’m not.”

The Tuskens did not object. They did not argue. They merely accepted. As Tahiri walked out of the circle in silence, she realized that was one thing the Tuskens had always been good at. Acceptance of death, acceptance of birth, acceptance of the desert’s freezing nights and scorching days. Acceptance of the harshness of the world they lived on.

Had Tahiri retained that, at least, from the people who had raised her? She didn’t know.

She walked back to the wall of the cave, here Ban was propped up. His eyelids fluttered open as she sat down next to him.

“Well?” He asked. “That took a while. What did they say?”

“She ran, somewhere across the desert. They’ll show us how to find her in the morning,” Tahiri said, then added, “It’s not safe at night. Too much unfriendly fauna.”

“The morning,” Ben sighed. “Well, at least we can rest. I don’t know how we’ll catch up with her though.”

“We’ll think of something,” Tahiri said, though she was too tired to think of what.

“What about supplies? Food and drink....”

“We’ll get those too,” she said.

“Good,” Ben muttered as he fought to keep awake.

“Go to sleep, Ben,” Tahiri gave him a soft smile. “It’s been a long day.”

“No kidding,” Ben breathed. “Well, at least now we’ve got a nice comfy cave to sleep in.”

“Better than nothing. Lay down and sleep, Ben.”

“Yeah, sure.” He shuffled his body forward, stretched himself out. As he lay down face-up, his eyes darted back to her and he asked, “Did they say anything else?”

Nothing Tahiri wanted to talk about, not yet. “No, sorry.”

“Oh, well,” Ben sighed. “Well, goodnight, I guess.”

“Goodnight, Ben,” Tahiri said.

Less than a minute later he started snoring, a low lazy drone.

It took Tahiri longer to fall asleep. Her mind was busy with old thoughts. But when it finally came, it was sweet oblivion.

Chapter 8

The return to Yavin 4 was like a dream. Tenel Ka's personal shuttle, the *Isolder*, exited hyperspace with her two Miy'til escorts. Immediately they were bathed in the warm orange-gold glow of the gas giant. The light from Yavin blocked out the light of the stars, and Yavin 4 hung in the pure-black distance like one perfect emerald sphere.

Zekk was at the helm of the *Isolder*, Taryn in the co-pilot's seat. Tenel Ka, Allana, and Lowie crowded forward to see the whisps and whorls of gas drift across the face of Yavin. Jaina kept in the back of the cabin, arms crossed, watching the face of the planet she hadn't seen in half a lifetime. For a long time, it had seemed like Yavin was the only thing she ever *did* see, the constant fixture in the skies of Yavin 4 both day and night. She had forgotten how deep its colors were, and how the gas seemed to writhe in slow-motion across its ever-changing face. She'd forgotten what a deep, beautiful green the moon was.

"You're looking at one of the most important places in the history of the galaxy," Zekk was telling Allana as she squeezed between his seat and Taryn's. "Before

any of us were born, Master Skywalker destroyed the Death Star in orbit over Yavin. That was the turning point of everything. Before that, nobody believed anyone could beat Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader. But with that great victory, the whole tide turned.”

Allana nodded dully. She seemed transfixed by the orange light of Yavin. Zekk smiled gently, and it struck Jaina that he was good with kids. Strange, since he was raised an orphan himself.

Zekk continued, “Way, way before that, Yavin 4 was the base of a great Sith Lord named Naga Sadow. Naga Sadow led his people, called the Sith, out of their original empire in Korriban and brought them into the Republic to make war on it. He failed, but the Sith people settled on Yavin 4. A thousand years later a Jedi named Exar Kun found the moon. The natives called themselves Massassi now, and they'd built huge temples. Exar Kun found remnants of Naga Sadow's great Dark Side magic here and made it into his own Sith empire.”

“Exar Kun was betrayed by Ulic Qel-Droma,” Allana said as if repeating staid lessons. “His spirit stayed in the temple for four thousand years until Uncle Luke and his Jedi knights defeated him.”

Lowbacca roared something. The green moon drew closer.

“He's right,” Tenel Ka said. “This place is truly rich with history. You're about to step foot on a place that's seen five thousand years of conflict between Jedi and Sith.”

“I know,” Allana looked at her mother, “But like Zekk said, that was a really long time ago.”

“Not for us,” Zekk said.

“Exactly,” Allana gave a little pout. “I don’t care about ancient Sith Lords. I want to see the places *you* care about!”

Tenel Ka smiled gently and patted her daughter’s shoulder. “I want to as well. But we don’t know how much the Yuuzhan Vong left behind.”

“Well, we’ll see in a minute,” Taryn chimed in. The green moon was filling their viewport. “I’m heading for the coordinates of the Great Temple, but it looks like there’s a storm system moving through the area. You should all strap in, it might get a little bumpy.”

“We could hold in orbit and wait out the storm,” Zekk suggested.

Taryn shot him a sly look. “Come on, dear, don’t you want some excitement on our honeymoon?” She punched the throttle, and they dove.

The Miy’til escorts hung in orbit while the *Isolder* stabbed into the storm. Jaina strapped into one of the seats in the back cabin along with Tenel Ka and Allana, while Lowie stayed up front to help Zekk and Taryn. As the wind buffeted the shuttle and jerked them in their seats, Allana asked, “Aunt Jaina, are you excited to be going back?”

“Excited?” Jaina forced a laugh. “I’ll be excited to get on solid ground again.”

“But Yavin 4 used to be your home, right? Don’t you want to go home again?”

Jaina looked at Allana, then at her mother. Tenel Ka’s lips were a flat line, her gray eyes inexpressive. Jaina shook her head and said, “It was all a really long time ago, long before you were born. I don’t even know how much I’ll remember.”

“I bet it will come back to you,” Allana said. “Really important things always do.”

"You're getting wise with age, aren't you?" Jaina smiled.

Allana did that pout again. "I'm almost ten. I'm not a little kid any more."

"No," Jaina admitted. "You're definitely not."

Allana looked satisfied. The shuttle jerked, and Tenel Ka put an arm around her daughter's shoulders. They said nothing else on the way down.

When they finally settled on solid ground, Jaina found she couldn't wait to get outside. She was used to spending time in spaceships, of course, but still she hated being tossed around inside a metal can. When the landing ramp lowered the smell of damp warm air rushed into the shuttle's artificial atmosphere. Lowie and Zekk went down first, followed by Taryn and Jaina, with Queen and Princess coming down last. Zekk had put them down in a clearing, and wind and light rain still shook the surrounding forest.

Jaina stepped tentatively onto the familiar soil. She'd been to more worlds than she could count, but somehow she knew immediately that this was Yavin 4, her old home. Even with the clouds covering Yavin overhead, there was something in the shape of the trees, and the smell of the thick warm air. In the distance, wild animals gave familiar cries she hadn't heard in half a lifetime.

And in the distance, peeking above the shaking treeline, the old temples rose high into the air.

"Oh, wow," Zekk said softly. Taryn came at his side and softly squeezed his hand. "Oh wow," he said again.

Jaina nodded. That was about all you could say.

Except for Allana, at least. She said, "This is awful! Is it always this rainy?"

Lowie chuckled and brushed some of the rain out of his fur. Tenel Ka said, "Only sometimes, dear."

"Let's get some cloaks from the ship," Zekk said. "And some supplies too. It shouldn't be a long walk to the temples, but the forest floor might be damp."

"Agreed," Tenel Ka nodded.

Allana scampered up the ramp, glad to be out of the rain. Zekk, Taryn, and Lowie followed. Tenel Ka lingered at the bottom of the ramp and sidled alongside Jaina as she walked back into the ship.

"How do you feel, friend Jaina?" she asked.

"Weird," Jaina said. "Just... weird."

"Fact," Tenel Ka said, nodding once.

The six of them set off through the jungle with raincloaks, two packs of rations, and a communicator wired directly to the Miy'tils in orbit. All the Jedi had their lightsabers, and Zekk, Lowie, and Taryn all had blasters. The jungle floor was relatively dry too, so passage through the forest was not difficult. When they got to the temple, though, it was clear things had changed.

Jaina had gotten only second-hand descriptions of the Yuuzhan Vong attack on Yavin 4, but she knew the Great Temple had been damaged. She was shocked to see the black-scored hole where its east face had been. The entire five-thousand-year-old structure had been smashed by some Yuuzhan Vong weapon, walls and steps and superstructure caved in. The Blueleaf Temple, smaller than the Great Temple and not as big a target, seemed in better conditions though it, too, bore many black battle-scars.

Interestingly, she saw virtually no remains of Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology. From what her late

brother Anakin had told her, the Vong had begun their typical attempts at terraforming the moon to make it more habitable for Vongformed creatures. She couldn't recall hearing about Alliance attempts to re-terraform the planet. Perhaps when the Vong left the planet after the war, they'd made sure to take all their materials with them.

Tucked behind the Blueleaf Temple, though, they found the burnt husk of what had once been a daumutek, shell-shaped organic bunkers the Vong could grow quickly on the planets they invaded. The jungle had already started to reclaim the wreckage, and creeper-vines climbed up the walls of the cracked, curving outer walls.

Leaving the others outside, Jaina and Lowie began exploring the inside of the structure, such as it was. The roof had been torn off, leaving it exposed to the elements. Grass and even small trees poked through the floor. From what she remembered of Yuuzhan Vong biotech, it seemed like the places that should have housed villip choirs or sensory apparati had been intentionally gouged out and destroyed, rather than simply abandoned to the elements. She wondered if this had been the shaper daumutek where her friend Tahiri had been held captive, and into which her brother Anakin had ventured to rescue her. She found herself glad that Ben and Tahiri were off on the other side of the galaxy, doing who-knew-what. Coming back to Yavin 4 was hard enough for Jaina; it would have been even worse for Tahiri to revisit the place of her torture.

As they stalked through the ruined daumutek, Jaina found herself glad for the distraction. She'd been afraid that Yavin 4 would bring back a rush of memories of

her brother as he once had been, always grinning and cracking the lame joke, always fishing for a smile from Tenel Ka. Instead the place seemed alien, which was far better than familiar right now.

Once she and Lowie had determined that the daumutek was indeed abandoned and overgrown, they went back to the others. By now Allana seemed eager to get inside the Great Temple and see the place her parents had called home, though the adults were far less certain.

"We don't know what kind of damage the Vong attack did to the superstructure," Taryn said as they circled back around the big pyramid to look at the damaged east face. "Even if this place had an internal energy grid, I doubt it's workable now."

Lowbacca roared and pulled a glowglobe out of his pack.

"Fact," Tenel Ka nodded, "But even so, we don't know the internal integrity of the building. The entire interior may have collapsed."

"These temples were made to last," Zekk reminded them. "Five thousand years and more than one invasion, and most of it's still standing. You know how it was built; layer by layer, step by step. Most of the damage doesn't look too deep to me. We should at least take a look inside. I'd bet the old hangar bay and convocation hall on the ground floor is intact. Maybe the old communications room too, where they planned the attack on the Death Star."

Allana groaned, "Not another history lesson."

"It's *family* history though," Zekk reminded her.

"I'm more worried about *what's* inside," Taryn spoke up. "I don't suppose any of you Jedi can scan the temple for life forms?"

"I don't feel anything," Jaina said, and Lowie moaned in agreement.

"Of course, if there was Vongformed life we wouldn't feel it anyway," Zekk said, then asked, "Would we?"

"I doubt it," Jaina shook her head. The Yuuzhan Vong had proven immune to the Force, something that had baffled the Jedi all throughout the war, until the living world Zonoma Sekot had revealed that the Yuuzhan Vong had been separated from the Force after their fall into barbarism, like a diseased person put under quarantine.

"Well," said Tenel Ka, "It seems there is only one way to determine the truth, and that is to investigate the scene. Fact?"

"Fact," Taryn nodded and readied her blaster rifle, a medium-range carbine. She affixed a light to its barrel while Lowbacca and Zekk prepared glowglobes. As they rounded the side of the Temple, the entrance loomed before them like a big black mouth, spread wide to take whoever wished to enter.

Allana, at least, still seemed excited. "Come on," she said, tugging her mother's hand. "What are we waiting for?"

"Nothing," said Taryn, and flicked on the light. Its beam stabbed into the darkness like a knife. "Nothing at all."

Everything felt different in the dark.

The Great Temple had always been a strange place, as ancient and ghost-filled as it was filled with life and young energy. When she'd allowed herself to think back to the place, Jaina had thought of the people who'd filled its old stone hallways: stubborn Tenel Ka,

brave Lowie, troubled Zekk, her brothers; Uncle Luke, wise Tionne, stern Kam Solusar, restive Kyp Durrón (when he wasn't off playing hero). Dark hallways flashed in the light of glowglobes and beam-lights, and with every flare of light she felt like some old remnant of the living and the dead was stirring.

The Temple itself was not as badly damaged as Jaina had expected. The big open hangar space at the base of the pyramid was untouched, though whatever equipment the Jedi or Rebel Alliance had left there had been stripped the presumably destroyed during the Yuuzhan Vong occupation. They moved through the great entry hall, up a long flight of stairs, into the convocation chamber. Stone benches, some intact and some broken, lined the tiers that descended to the speaking floor. Lowie and Zekk sent their glow-globes levitating high in the air, casting the entire vast chamber in a dim artificial light.

"Wow!" Allana exclaimed. "This place is huge!"

"Yep," Zekk said, "You could fit a whole lot of Jedi in here."

Lowie grunted in agreement and went down the steps. There was a stout platform in the center of the arena, from which Uncle Luke had given many addresses. Jaina's mind flashed back less to those, and to the fierce debates during the Vong War that had turned this convocation hall raucous. She remembered all of Kyp Durrón's fiery speeches, and Uncle Luke's attempts to meet that fire with coldness and calm. It hadn't always worked, and sometimes Jaina herself had felt drawn to Kyp's personality, which was then as magnetic as it was angry. Anakin had been tempted too, she remembered, though not Jacen. Back then he'd clung to peace like Kyp clung to his lightsaber.

"This is where Master Skywalker used to gather the Jedi," Tenel Ka was explaining to her daughter as the two stepped carefully down to the central platform.

"It's a huge space!" Allana marveled. "Did they fill up the whole room? Were there that many Jedi?"

"Not quite," Tenel Ka admitted, "But when Master Skywalker spoke he commanded everyone's attention."

"I know," said Allana, "He's always like that."

"And he always has been," Zekk said, and chuckled to himself. "You know... I used to be kinda scared of Master Skywalker."

Jaina smiled at that memory. After his brush with the dark side, Zekk had been more conscious of its temptation than any Jedi she's known, and he'd always pressed hard to curry Uncle Luke's favor. He'd been scared of other people's judgment then, and maybe still was.

"Master Skywalker has never been intimidating," Tenel Ka arched an eyebrow. "Quite the contrary, he has always acted rather... fatherly toward me."

"Well, he was friends with your mother," Zekk shrugged. "I was just a street rat with a bad attitude."

Taryn, still at the top of the stairs, said, "Will we visit the underworld of Coruscant for the rest of our honeymoon, dear?"

"If you really want to," Zekk looked up at her. "It might be the least popular vacation spot in the galaxy."

"Then we should have no problem booking a hotel," Taryn said, and raised her spotlight to scan the roof of the hall. Jaina's eyes followed the lights. The roof seemed largely intact at first, until Taryn's spotlight caught a long crack running from the center of the ceiling to what must have been the eastern wall. Lowie gave a low moaning sound.

"He's right," Taryn said, "This place isn't as stable as we thought. We should be very cautious."

Allana tugged on her mother's hand. "Mom, do you think you can find your room?"

"My room?" Tenel Ka looked down at her daughter.

"Yeah," said Allana. "Do you think you remember?"

Tenel Ka looked thoughtful. "I believe I may."

"I want to see it," Allana said eagerly.

"If we go into the upper levels we'll have to be careful," Zekk said.

"Fact," nodded Tenel Ka, "But we've come this far. It would be a waste to turn back now."

The halls of the Great Temple were dark things, illuminated only by bursts of artificial light. They were cool and damp, and the air smelled of vegetation. The jungle had crept into the hole in the Temple left by the Yuuzhan Vong, and it felt like the moon was finally starting to reclaim what had been built from its stones five thousand years before. Without light, or the hum of living and the Force, it felt like an empty thing, haunted not even by ghosts but by dim twenty-year-old memories.

When Jaina tried to find her way to the room she and Jacen had shared all those years ago, she was relieved to find the way blocked by a collapsed hallway. Zekk fared little better, but Tenel Ka was able to lead Allana to the room where she had lived. Dim gray light shone through its porthole window. Tattered remains of someone's mattress lay on one ledge, while a crumpled desk slumped against the opposite wall. Allana looked disappointed. Tenel Ka did not.

"Come," she said, leading the group away from her old room. "We should reach the top of the Temple."

"Are you sure we can get there?" Jaina asked.

"Most of the structure is still sound," Tenel Ka said. "Besides, haven't you forgotten, Jaina? I knew every corner of this place, inside and out."

And it was true, Jaina thought with a reluctant smile. Tenel Ka had been the master explorer of both the Temple and the jungle, always seeking out new ways to challenge her mind and body, even after the loss of her arm. She had climbed trees, scaled cliffs, and of course she had found a dozen ways to get to the top of the Great Temple, inside and out.

They needed to give Allana a few Force-boosts to get her over a ledge here and there, but in the end it wasn't hard. When they emerged at the Temple's peak the rain had stopped, and afternoon sunlight was beginning to break through the clouds, casting the sky in mottled shades of gold and pink. The great orange-yellow form of Yavin shone faintly through the cloud-whisps. The great jungle expanded in every direction, tree-tops swaying in the wind. A few birds glided through the air, v-shapes hovering in the distance. Jaina couldn't deny it. It was a beautiful sight.

"Wow!" Allana marveled, spinning herself around to get the full panorama. "This is amazing!"

"It is impressive," Taryn sound almost grudging. "You can even see the clearing where we left out ship."

"Good to know," Zekk breathed. He stood at the edge of the roof, staring down the eastern side at the charred rubble and creeping vegetation. Lowie pointed his head to the sky and let out a proud roar. Tenel Ka giggled, and Jaina did too, against herself.

"I would come here every morning," Tenel Ka said, putting her arm around Allana. "I would get up an hour

before dawn and exercise in the jungle, then run to the top of the Temple to greet the dawn.”

Allana made that pouty face again. “Is that why you always try to get me up early?”

“A habit made early is a habit for life,” Tenel Ka said. “And I *have* missed this place. Spending too much time on Hapes has been.... softening.”

“I don't think you're going soft, Tenel Ka,” Zekk grinned at her, then said to Jaina, “She still gets up an hour before dawn, you know. The Palace still has plenty of walls to scale and ledges to climb.”

“And she never takes the same route twice,” Taryn added. “It's a nightmare for her security detail.”

“And she always tries to get me to join her,” Allana whimpered.

Jaina fixed Tenel Ka with a tight smile, and her friend returned it. Jaina was surprised to find how relieved she was, learning that Tenel Ka was still Tenel Ka, after all the sad turns her life had given her. Some people, thankfully, never changed.

Jaina stepped careful to the eastern ledge and stood beside Zekk. She said, “A long way down, isn't it?”

“That it is,” Zekk said. “Shame about the Temple, but in a way it just shows how amazing this place is. Five thousand years old and it takes an extragalactic invasion to finally put a dent in it.”

“Yep, those Sith engineers could work wonders.”

“Well, I give credit where it's due,” Zekk shrugged. He looked down at Jaina, and asked in lowered voice, “You've been pretty quiet this whole time.”

Jana glanced askance at Taryn, then at Zekk. “I'm fine. It's just... been a long time.”

“I know,” Zekk said. “But it's not all gone, is it? You, me, Tenel Ka, Lowie, together again.”

"It's nice," Jaina admitted, but they both knew who was missing.

A memory came back to her, vague and distant. She remembered standing on a cliffside and seeing these temple peaks from a far distance. Jacen had been with her, and Anakin too. The bittersweet thought made something well up in her throat; her eyes became unexpectedly moist.

At that point Taryn sidled along Zekk's other flank. Instead of interjecting, though, she took you a pair of macrobinoculars and brought them to her eyes. She scanned the horizon and said, "Is there another temple over there? Looks like... five kilometers south-south-east?"

Lowie growled warning, and Zekk said, "He's right. We don't want to go there."

"What's there?" Taryn asked.

"A Sith Temple," Jaina said. "*Another* Sith Temple, actually. One Exar Kun built, four thousand years back. I think Corran Horn blasted it to rubble though, or at least part of it."

"I suppose so." Taryn adjusted to macrobinoculars. "Is it located in a clearing?"

"A lake, I think," Zekk said. "It wasn't really a place we wanted to go."

"We don't have to go there too," Allana said.

Lowie moaned in relief.

"But what about that other temple, the Blueleaf Temple? Did you guys use that?"

"Master Skywalker did use it as an additional training area," Tenel Ka confirmed. "We could visit that too, if you like."

"I don't see why not," Zekk said. "We did come all this way, didn't we?"

“Fact,” Tenel Ka patted her daughter's shoulder. “Come. It's going to take a bit more effort to get down safely...”

“I'm ready for anything,” Allana said with a youthful confidence that made everyone, even Jaina, crack a smile.

Before they could start down, though, they heard a loud noise from somewhere within the Temple. It sound-ed like cracking stone.

“What was that?” Zekk said, suddenly alert.

Lowie moaned something, and Tenel Ka nodded in agreement. “Some crumbling structure, I expect. We should be cautious.”

As they moved again through the dark halls of the Temple, Jaina felt a chill go through her body. She looked around at the others: Zekk, Lowie, and Tenel Ka all seemed extra-alert, and she felt a nervousness emanating from all of them.

“Do you feel that?” she spoke aloud.

“I feel something,” Zekk muttered, and Lowie grunted in agreement.

Taryn, at the head of the group, stopped dead in her tracks. “Fell what? Is this some kind of Jedi thing?”

“I don't think I feel anything...” Allana said. “It does feel a little.... chilly, maybe...”

“This is familiar,” Zekk said. “Almost like...”

“Like what?” Jaina asked, because she didn't want to be the one to say it. She hadn't felt this in the Force for almost twenty years, but she remembered it in her nightmares.

“Voxyn,” said Tenel Ka.

“It can't be voxyn!” Jaina snapped. “We killed their queen! Anakin *died* killing their queen! And how could they be here, on Yavin? The Yuuzhan Vong are gone!

Nobody's even seen them in over a decade! It's not possible!"

"We need to get out of this Temple fast," Taryn snapped. "We'll call the fighters in orbit and have them pick us up."

"There's not room for all six of us in Miy'tils," Zekk told his wife. "Let's just stay calm and get back to the shuttle."

"It *can't* be voxyn," Jaina repeated. "Something... else maybe, but not voxyn!"

"Oh, Jaina," Tenel Ka breathed, "I'm so sorry."

Jaina spun to look at her friend, but as soon as she turned they heard the skittering of claws on stone. Taryn spun her light-beam to face the noise, and motion flashed out of the darkness: scampering legs, white teeth, glow-ing gold eyes. It lunged forward and in the cramped space of the hall there was no room to hide.

Tenel Ka grabbed her daughter with the Force and hurled her against the floor. Taryn fired vainly, laser-blasts leaving pitiful scorch-marks on its armored hide. Zekk, Jaina, and Lowie ignited their lightsabers even as they tried to doge the creature.

Lowie let out a yelp of pain as the voxyn threw him to the ground. As the creature whipped past them, Jaina stabbed outward with her lightsaber, jabbing the animal in the side. It let out a horrible scream and whipped its tail back and forth, knocking Zekk to the ground. In the cramped space of the hallway there was no room for it to spin around, so instead of turning to attack Jaina it kept barreling down the hall. It turned with the corner and kept moving, leaving its victims in its wake.

"Report!" Taryn snapped, shakily moving for her husband.

"We're all right." Tenel Ka said, finally stepping back from Allana after shielding her with her own body.

Lowie let out a weak moan, and Jaina crouched low to inspect his wounds. She felt warm blood on his fur, and in the light of the glowlamp saw red streaks across his side. Lowie groaned again, trying to tell her the wounds weren't too bad, but his eyes were going unfocused. Jaina's mind tried to race back twenty years to that horrible worldship over Myrkr, where they had fought the voxyn and doing so lost almost half a team of promising young Jedi Knights, including her younger brother Anakin and, in some sadder way, her older one too. She remembered the voxyn's acidic saliva, and their poison-tipped tails, and tried to remember if their claws were poisoned too.

Taryn was already on the comm to the Miy'tils in orbit, calling for help. Zekk, dazed and bruised but apparently okay, shambled over to Lowie and pulled some bacta bandages from his pack.

"Oh, this isn't really good for a Wookiee..." Zekk shook his head as he tried to attach the bandages to Lowie's furry hide. Their friend was moaning weakly, still, but his breath was getting slower. Jaina put her small hand in his paw and held it as tight as she could, willing him to hold on until help came.

"We need to get out of here," Tenel Ka said, helping Allana to her feet.

"It'll be too hard to get the Wookiee out of here," Taryn checked the power cells on her blaster rifle.

"We are *not* leaving him behind," Jaina snapped.

"It will be too hard to take him out the main entrance," Taryn said coldly. "We need to take him back up top."

"That's the way to voxyn went," Zekk reminded her.

“Or we try to find a hole in the east face,” Jaina tried to calm herself. “That would be the easiest.”

“Agreed,” Tenel Ka said, and clasped her daughter's hand. “Let's go quickly, before that... *thing* comes back.”

Taryn took the front of the group, with Tenel Ka and Allana behind her, advising her on which way to move through the Temple's dark winding corridors. Jaina and Zekk shared the burden of Force-levitating Lowbacca, all the while reaching out with their awareness and trying to sense of the voxyn. They still felt it, that familiar, half-forgotten animal *need* to destroy and kill, like the Dark Side embodied at its most primal. Mixed in with that she thought she felt fear, like the kind a wounded animal might, but she wasn't sure. It had always been Jacen who worked well with animals, at least until Myrkr.

Tenel Ka was able to lead them to a few caved-in corridors, through which they were narrowly able to squeeze Lowbacca. When they emerged onto a breach in the Temple's east face, the two Miy'til fighters were already waiting for them, hovering in the air with cockpits popped open. Just as they stepped out into the open, Taryn began firing her rifle downward toward the jungle clearing around the Temple. The others looked down to see the sleek black form of the voxyn racing away from from the Temple mouth. If Taryn's shots connected, they didn't do any good. The creature quickly disappeared in the jungle, though from its direction it seemed to be heading for the distant black pyramid of Exar Kun's temple. The thought filled Jaina with dread, but somehow she wasn't surprised.

Jaina and Zekk lifted Lowbacca into the empty passenger seat behind the pilot's seat, while Taryn got

on the comlink and ordered the pilot to take him to the shuttle for immediate medical action.

"They can take someone else in the other ship," Zekk reminded them as the pilot awkwardly strapped the unconscious Lowie into his seat.

"Allana, get in the ship," Tenel Ka said firmly. The girl looked at her mother, and her eyes clearly held the typical Solo stubbornness, but in the end the encounter with the voxyn had rattled her, and she nodded. Tenel Ka Force-lifted her daughter into the air. Allana gently waved to the others as she was set down in the Miy'til's passenger seat. The pilot moved to strap her in, but she did it herself.

Tenel Ka took Taryn's comlink and spoke directly to the pilot. "Take her back to Hapes immediately. Make no delay."

"Yes, ma'am," the pilot affirmed, and the cockpit swung shot. Jaina felt a wave of relief as she watched the Miy'til shoot off into the sky, red engine-trail blazing. The other ship, the one with Lowbacca strapped inside, still hovered over the Temple.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Zekk said, gesturing to the ship.

"Oh, no," Taryn shook her head, "You can't be serious."

"Fastest way to the shuttle." Jaina nodded in agreement. "Probably the safest too, if your pilot's good."

"She's one of my best," Tenel Ka said. "Shall we?"

Taryn sighed, strapped her rifle to her side, and let Zekk put an arm around her waist. They went first, hovering up into the air, drifting toward the Miy'til, then gently dropping onto its scimitar-shaped wing.

They pressed themselves flat against its surface, gripping its edge hard.

“Are you ready, friend Jaina?” Tenel Ka said, reaching out to grip Jaina's hand in her own.

“As I'll ever be,” she said, and they took off in the air.

Chapter 9

As it turned out, the Red Bantha Clan had one last parting gift for the *chuta ootlanders*. It wasn't a particularly impressive parting gift, not at first glance. Apparently they'd found it abandoned on the edge of their territory, half-buried in sand. They'd dug it out and ransacked the thing of various components, as Tusken usually did when they got their hands on outlander technology. They'd torn out parts of the control console, ripped out all the seating, and peeled away half of the outer plating. But at the end of the day, it was still an XP-40 landspeeder with intact engines and repulsors. The question was whether that would be enough.

Ben had hoped to start out at dawn. Their quarry already had maybe a half-day head start on them, wherever she was going. Tahiri reminded him that she was probably moving at night and hiding during the day, like any sane being would, and that meant there was still plenty of time to catch up to her. It made logical sense, but it didn't make Ben any happier to spend a good four hours trying to figure out if the XP-40 would fly without exploding on them.

Two of the three engines still worked, which was a start. The repulsors looked intact, though the control systems had been cannibalized. Ben had decent technical proficiency but he was no expert on the internal construction of SoroSuub landspeeders, which meant a lot of time with his upper body shoved into the tangle of wires and mechanisms beneath the landspeeder's forward hull, trying to determine what was a flux capacitor and what was a radiator. The latter was going to be pretty important if they were going to get this thing going.

So after four hours of fishing around inside the guts of the XP-40, he walked over to the rock outcropping where Tahiri had been alternately watching and talking with the Tusken leader, he had no idea about what. At that time Tahiri was sitting on the rock alone, watching him approach. When he got there he dropped himself on the stone next to her and sighed.

"This is crazy," he said. "Do these people have any mechanical aptitude, at all? Did they know what they were doing when they found this thing? Or did they just pull out stuff they thought looked pretty?"

"Mostly the latter," Tahiri said. "Tuskens are a very traditional people. Anything of outlander origin is considered suspect."

"But they still scavenge for scrap."

Tahiri shrugged. "They don't like foreigners, but they also like to survive, which is never easy in the desert. It's a strange relationship, I know. They'd never ditch banthas for landspeeders, but they're fine with scavenging equipment or trading for outlander guns."

"That was the biggest kriffing mess I've ever seen," Ben complained. "I had to completely rewire the radiator. I had to take out one engine entirely because

somewhat took out the stabilizer, and if we'd try to fly without it the whole thing would blow up. Most of the front hull plating is gone, which means this thing's innards are going to get *coated* in sand." He shook his head. "This is crazy."

"But will it fly?" Tahiri asked.

Ben stared at the landspeeder, then nodded. "Yeah, she'll fly."

Tahiri draped an arm over his shoulder and gave him a hug. "Good job, Ben."

"She'll fly for *now*," Ben clarified. "She'll fly until the radiator bursts or an engine falls off or the insides get so clogged with sand they just plain stop working."

"Take it slow and steady," Tahiri said. "I don't think we'll have to go far."

"You think so?" Ben scowled.

"While you were working they showed me which way she went. Out across the Dune Sea, west-north-west. My guess is, she's on her way to Anchorhead."

"Anchorhead," Ben repeated. "Sounds familiar. Dad grew up outside there. But that's not a big city like Mos Eisley, is it?"

"No, but it'll have speeders for rent, speeders that can take her- or us- to the spaceport."

"Wizard," Ben sighed.

"Wizard," Tahiri smiled. "By my guess, we're about a half-day's ride from Anchorhead. Stretch it out to a day if we go slow and steady. Either way, we should be moving a lot faster than the girl, so we won't have any problems overtaking her."

"Hopefully," Ben said. "You know how to track in a landspeeder?"

"Never done it before, but if we go slow it shouldn't be too hard." Tahiri paused. "I think. It's been a while

since I had to track on an open desert. I don't think the girl's going to be covering her tracks though."

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Ben stood up. "I'm going to give our precious carriage a once-over before we get started."

"Take your time, Ben," she said. "I'm going to say some goodbyes."

"Goodbyes?" Ben raised an eyebrow. "You getting back to your roots or something?"

"Not quite," she shook her head. She had a sad smile. "But these people saved us. They deserve thanks."

"Yeah, well, you do that," Ben said, and scrambled back to the landspeeder. He didn't like spending any more time around Tusken than necessary. They might have saved him, but he knew very well what if it hadn't been for Tahiri, they'd have slaughtered him just as easily.

It was strange to think about such primal, tribal creatures as the Tusken. He wondered how they could relate to the Force. Tahiri, obviously, had come to the Light Side even after being raised in such a harsh environment. She'd had plenty of problems staying there, but that was due to what happened *after* she'd left Tatooine.

His father had explained to him how the Yuuzhan Vong had been *stripped* of the Force due to the savagery their civilization had fallen into. He still wasn't exactly sure how that worked, but it seemed almost like the Force had cut them off, like a doctor severing an infected limb. Perhaps the Tusken were something similar. They were outside civilization, which meant their violence and anger was outside the Force as well. If so, that meant the Force, with its Light Side and Dark Side, were the province of civilization

only, of beings with reason and law, completely detached from the more natural, animal state of being.

It was a weird thing to think about and Ben pushed it aside. He had to concentrate on one thing now, one thing only, and that was getting the landspeeder to fly without killing them all.

As he set himself to work, he grimly reminded himself that Jacen had also asked too many questions.

The Red Bantha Clan didn't give them any hollering send-off, and for that Ben was grateful. Two of them were gracious enough to give the landspeeder a forward shove across the sands, which was nice, because even though the repulsors worked pretty well, Ben needed a little forward momentum to bring the engines online.

The Tusken scrappers had also been gracious enough to leave the forward windscreen intact, which meant that even though the front of the landspeeder was sucking dust (some of which seeped its way through the machinery and into the seating area) at least it wasn't blowing into their faces.

Tahiri was right, at least, about the girl not being hard to track. Even after a half-day's time, her path was still evident. Her tracks wound their way through the troughs of sand dunes, just as Ben and Tahiri had done the day before. From time to time Ben would cut the engines entirely and drift on repulsors to keep them from overheating. It was good to stay close to the ground, following her tracks at a pace that, while slow, was steady. At Ben's guess, they could catch up with the girl in just a few hours. Assuming she was still out there, trekking across the dunes.

Ben and Tahiri didn't talk much on the way, but after about an hour of flight they spotted something unusual on the horizon. The girl's tracks were leading right to it, so they followed both their quarry and their curiosity to find a massive hulk and sand-scorched metal towering like a monolith some twenty meters high. Its russet body sat on a pair of mammoth treads which were scorched with blaster marks. The treads had sunken half-way into the sand by now, and the big trapezoidal body tilted awkwardly to one side. The craft's heavy hull plating had been halfway stripped off, exposing large portions of the inner body to the elements.

"A jawa sandcrawler," Tahiri explained as they settled the landspeeder next to its derelict hull. "Looks like it's been here forever. Decades, probably."

"I don't feel the girl here," Ben said, stretching out with the Force.

"I don't either," Tahiri said. "I thought I saw tracks leading away. She probably just stopped here to investigate."

"Think we should too?" Ben craned his neck and tried to look inside the sandcrawler. All he could see was thin layers of sand draped across miscellaneous machinery.

Tahiri shook her head. "I don't know why we should, unless you really need some equipment for this thing. Even then, I doubt you'd find much good here. Looks like scrapppers got to this thing ages ago."

"Yeah," Ben nodded, "You're probably right. We don't want to waste much time either."

Ben kicked the landspeeder into a slow lop around the hull. Sure enough, they found a second set of tracks, these ones leading back across the desert. They set themselves on the girl's tracks again and kept moving.

As they moved, Tahiri pointed out something on the northern horizon. In all other directions the sky was a sharp blue, clearly demarcated from the white gold of the sand dunes. To the north, some sand-colored blur lingered on the horizon, like an ugly smudge on a painting.

"What is it?" Ben asked, trying to keep his eyes on the tracks.

"Sandstorm," Tahiri breathed. "They don't happen too often, but they can be nasty. We need to keep an eye on it."

Ben nodded in wordless agreement and kept going. Maybe ten minutes later, Tahiri tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Look at it now." He took his eyes off the tracks and looked back north. It was getting bigger all right, an ugly mustard-colored pall that seemed to marshal on the horizon like an approaching storm. Which, Ben grimly realized, was exactly what it was.

"Well?" He said, "What do we do now?"

"Try and find shelter," Tahiri said.

"What shelter?" He waved his hand at the endless dunes.

"Keep your eyes open," she said. "We've probably got an hour before the storm hits."

"Lovely," Ben grimaced.

"Trust the Force, Ben," she said chidingly.

He kept grimacing.

In the end, though, it was their quarry that saved them. It was hard to spot at first, but the tracks led them straight toward some old homestead. A squat, sand-colored dome sat to one side of a broad pit. A few moisture vaporators stood like lonely, rusted sentinels around the homestead's perimeter. As they got close it

became obvious that the homestead had been abandoned for some time. Sand had crept through the open doorway of the dome, and the pit was half-submerged. By that time the sandstorm was approaching fast, and Ben could hear the distant scream of sand whipped violently by wind.

They circled the homestead once, but there were no tracks leading away from it. When Ben reached out with the Force, he couldn't find her.

"What do we do?" Ben asked. "This place is a wreck!"

"Best we're going to get," Tahiri said. "There, see over there? That looks like a vehicle garage."

"I see it," Ben nodded. To one side of the dome, a low-set metal shack. He gave the engines a kick that sent them sliding across the sands, right toward its open mouth. He slowed down the repulsors as the landspeeder entered the garage, then killed them entirely. It was a big space, dark, but with enough room to hold two or three landspeeders, though their XP-40 was the only one there now.

"If we can close this door, we should be safe," Ben said as he hopped out of the cockpit. The garage door had retracted upward, into the ceiling, but all it took was a tug from the Force to bring it sliding back down again. It came down with minimal protest and settled tightly against the threshold, effectively sealing them off from the sandstorm that quickly began to pound against their door.

"Well," Ben said, "That was easy."

"Not surprising," Tahiri said. "Look at this place. Barely any sand." She gestured to the metal floor, the tool-sheds, the equipment bins. Everything was rusted and dusty, but no sand.

"This door's been closed for a while," Ben said.

"And these grating," Tahiri gestured to the floor. "I'd bet anything there was another landspeeder in here just hours ago."

"She stole a ship," Ben felt a surge of panic. "She could be at Anchorhead now, or even Mos Eisley. How are we supposed to track her?"

"Calm down. Let's think about this," Tahiri said. "This place looks like it's been empty for decades. Whatever speeder she found is probably just as bad as ours. I'd bet she went to Anchorhead first, probably to get a better speeder."

"That's a big gamble," Ben said.

"Best we've got," Tahiri shrugged. "But she's not here now, that for sure."

"So we have to wait out this storm, then?" Ben scowled. "How long do you think it'll be?"

"I don't know. An hour or two at most. I was moving fast."

"Great," sighed Ben. "So we have to sit around and twiddle our thumbs while she gets away? That's poodoo, Tahiri."

"We might as well explore this place while we're stuck here. She might have left a clue or something," Tahiri said. "See that door over there? They should have underground tunnels connecting the various parts of the homestead. They usually do."

"Assuming they haven't been filled up with sand. How long do you think this place has been abandoned?"

Tahiri shrugged. "From the look of this equipment? Decades, at least. Hard to tell in a place like Tatooine, where all the equipment's already out of date before it gets here. Still, we might as well explore."

“Yeah,” Ben admitted. “I guess we've got nothing else to do, huh?”

“That’s the spirit,” she slapped him on the back.

“Think we’ll find anything useful.”

“Only one way to find out. Come on, let’s poke around.”

Chapter 10

Myri Antilles barely knew her cousin, once-Imperial Head of State but now just Mr. Jagged Fel. She did know that he'd always come off as a stuffed-shirt. He'd probably get along better with Syal.

She stood across the table from him in the briefing room on the Imperial strike cruiser *Wessex*. It was an old ship, heavily remodeled with all sorts of surveillance and reconnaissance devices Myri knew they'd never let her see. Its commander was standing next to Jag, and she was definitely not what Myri had expected: a small, red-skinned Twi'lek woman with alert gold eyes and tight-pressed lips that seemed equally likely to curve into a frown or sly smile. Myri didn't like her already, but admitted that she was an interesting addition to a briefing that already included a genetically-modified Gamorrean and a human-raised Yuuzhan Vong.

Viull "Scut" Gorsat was wearing a home-grown neoglith masquer now, and his face was that of a forgettable human in his early thirties, but Myri and Voort had agreed that it was best to be honest about his species with Fel and Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor, even

if they didn't plan on advertising the fact to the entire Imperial crew.

"My parents adopted me when I was a small child," he was explaining to them ever now. "I still don't know much about Yuuzhan Vong culture, aside from what I've read in books."

"But you know about their technology," Red said evenly.

"I made a point to study it as I got older," he nodded. "I've worked a little with the sample creatures still in possession of Alliance Intelligence, and attempted to replicate it using organic material native to our galaxy, like the masquer I'm wearing."

"That makes you the closest thing we have to an expert," Fel said. "We'll see how you can help us in the coming days."

"I'll do my best," Scut said, though Myri could see the doubt in his eyes. He wasn't conflicted about potentially fighting the Vong; he was scared he wouldn't be up to the responsibility that was falling on his shoulders. Privately, on their way here, he'd told Myri he'd always been afraid a day like this would come.

Red tapped a button on the table and a holo-map of the Imperial border sector and neighboring systems materialized. She said, "Our current plan is to send two-fighter reconnaissance missions into each system. At twelve fighters, that's six missions at a time. We'll allot three hours to each mission. It's going to be a very long, tedious slog, but it's important to be thorough. There's a million planets, moons, asteroids, and nebulae they could be hiding in."

"It's like looking for one grain of sand on a beach," Voort shook his head. "We'd almost be better monitor-

ing space for signals of another battle, then responding when necessary.”

“We’re already on the lookout,” Fel said, “But as of right now we haven’t found anything.”

“What makes you think they’re even any place near here?” Myri asked. “This battle was over a week ago. They could be on the far side of the galaxy by now.”

Red shook her head. “It’s very likely they’ve dived deeper into the Unknown Regions, but we can’t go deeper ourselves without making sure our back is clear. Like I said, it will be a long slog. Thankfully, the star charts you brought with us should make things somewhat easier.”

“Glad to help,” Myri said quietly.

“The rotation of pilots is up to you, of course,” Fel said. “We’ve already prepared an extensive list of planets to be searched, though if we uncover traces of either fleet we will of course consult together to determine the best course of action.”

“Of course,” echoed Voort.

Red took a datachip out of her breast pocket and slid it across the table to Myri. “This is the master list of all systems to be searched. It also contains data on the recovered wreckage, for all your pilots to view.”

“Thank you,” Myri said, picking it up carefully and placing it in her vest pocket. “I’ll be sure to.”

“As for when we’re *not* hunting phantom fleets,” Red said, “Your pilots have free access to their quarters, of course, as well as the eatery and all facilities on decks four and five-B. The identity cards we’ve provided them have such access keyed in. Everything else is off-limits.”

“Including to their commanding officer?” Voort asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Including you. You understand, I trust.”

“I do,” said Voort. “And our service weapons?”

“Yours as well, though I hope you have no cause to use them.”

“Neither do I.” He extended a fat green hand across the table. “I look forward to hunting with you, Lieutenant Colonel.”

The Twi'lek woman gave the Gamorrean an appraising glance, then reached out and put her small red hand in his. “Likewise, Mister SaBinring.”

Jag and Fy'lyor watched them leave. When the door hissed shut behind them, she turned to him and said, “A Yuuzhan Vong raised by humans, a talking Gamorrean who escaped from the lab, and your colorful cousin. Tell me, does the head of Alliance Intelligence have a sense of humor?”

“The Twi'lek raised by humans asks that to the human raised by Chiss.” Jag reminded her. “You could say the same about Head of State Reige.”

Fy'lyor looked thoughtful. “Tell me, has your wife ever spoke of the Force as having a sense of humor?”

For some reason Fy'lyor talking about his wife made him uncomfortable. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Never mind,” Fy'lyor waved a hand. “Tell me about your cousin.”

“I don't have much to say. She's my uncle's daughter, but I barely know her. She has an older sister who I believe is a rising officer in the Alliance navy.”

“Well, after losing so many senior officials, I'm not surprised,” Fy'lyor seemed to purr. Like a lot of Imperials, she took more than a little pleasure in every mess the Alliance government got itself into.

"If they have anything of their father in them, I'm sure both Antilles girls are more than capable."

"Are you so sure? We've both seen plenty of their type, Fel. The ones born of great war heroes, government officials, or rich businessmen, who get every honor handed down to them by birth."

"Not everyone has to be born to a slave, or raised an outsider," Jag said firmly. "I trust Wedge Antilles to raise his children right."

Fy'lyor favored him with a sly smile. "You're a bit of a romantic, aren't you, Fel? I can see how you charmed your Jedi princess."

Jag looked away. "Regardless of the professional abilities of the Antilles women, I'm sure Chief Loran sent us his best. My uncle used to fly with SaBinring."

"Yes, you said he was a product of the old Warlord Zsinj's experiments. Not only did they give him speech, but a superior intelligence as well."

"He was a mathematics professor for a while, but he's clearly returned to intelligence work."

"And what about the Vong? Do you know anything else about him?"

"Nothing beyond his personnel file, and not about any of the other pilots either. No, I'm sorry, there's also one older pilot named Sharr Latt. I fought with him during the Yuuzhan Vong War. He's clever, good at schemes and propaganda."

"This Chief Loran sounds like a very... creative man, to make such a unit."

"It was originally my uncle's idea, but I believe Loran's creative too. *And* he has a sense of humor."

"Well, we'll see how long this little partnership lasts," Fy'lyor sighed.

"What do you mean?" Jag asked.

"Oh, come on, Fel," she said. "You know it as well as I do. If there's some rogue Alliance fleet out there fighting the Vong, they're not going to let us stroll back to Bastion with proof. They'll try to silence us and keep their secret."

Jag shook his head. "That's might be the way the Empire operates, but not the Alliance. Not Chief Loran."

"I don't believe you," she said. "Which is why they'll be monitored at all times. At the first sign of trouble we can gas them in their quarters and dump them into space."

Jag glared at her. "You will do no such thing, not while I'm aboard."

"Then you can go with them," Fy'lyor said, voice icy. "This is my vessel and under no circumstances will I allow her or her crew to be destroyed, either by Alliance agents or the Yuuzhan Vong."

Jag sighed. "You disappoint me, Lieutenant Colonel."

Fy'lyor seemed to hesitate, then asked, "Why, if I may ask?"

"There's a fine line between practical and ruthless. One keeps you alive, the other makes everyone your enemy. If the Empire has any future in this galaxy, it will have to learn the difference."

"You're the one who tried to bring democracy to the Empire, then dropped the whole mess in Vitor Reige's lap and walked away. I don't need a man like you lecturing me about responsibility and command."

That attack stung, because it was what Jag had been trying not to tell himself for the past two years. Surrendering his position to Reige had been the only way out of a civil war that could have destroyed the

Empire, and at the time he'd congratulated himself for his cleverness, but on reflection he knew it had been unfair to Reige, and worst of all, the thing he'd been raised from birth to despise: a cowardly dereliction of duty.

The hurt must have been visible on his face. Her features softened slightly. She said, "Tell me, Fel. Do you think the Empire has a future?"

There was rare vulnerability in her voice. He examined her face, trying to tell if she was putting him on, but she'd shown no proclivity toward acting thus far.

"I can't say. For now, with the Alliance still getting back on its feet, we have a place. In the long run? I don't know. But I think the Empire has to adapt. That's not what you'd think the Empire would be good at, but you never know. The fact that you are here, commanding this mission, is a good sign in itself. I expected to be working with some Moff's preening son, but instead I have someone who earned her rank through devotion and skill." She kept from smiling, but still looked proud. "Maybe you've spent so long climbing the ranks that you see everyone as an enemy. I don't know. But I can tell you right now that real leadership requires trust. Sometimes it involves letting go. I trusted Reige enough to hand the Empire to him."

She regarded him carefully. "And do you trust me, Fel? At all?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I'm still trying to decide myself."

She smiled. It was a weak, honest smile. "Very well. I suppose I'll have to earn it."

He watched her exit, leaving him alone in the briefing room. Gripping the table-sides, he let out a long breath

he hadn't known he'd been holding. This was going to be a very interesting mission.

Two X-wings hung, barely visible, in the blackness of space. The StealthX fighters were painted matte-black, and modified to elude all but the most intensive sensor sweeps. If there was anyone in the system, they wouldn't know they were being observed.

It was either their twelfth or thirteenth recon since the mission began, Scut couldn't remember. He and his Clawdite partner, Turman, had been jumping in and out of systems of days, running intensive sensors sweeps of ever planet, moon, asteroid, or space rock, hoping for some signs of activity. Most of these systems didn't have names, only alphanumeric designations assigned by Old Republic researchers decades ago. Missions like these reminded Scut just how immense the galaxy really was, and how much of it was filled with nothing except lifeless rocks and gasses drifting through the vacuum.

In a way, though, he was glad of it. If someone did find Yuuzhan Vong ships lurking in the Unknown Regions, he didn't want to be the one to do it. It wasn't that he was afraid of fighting members of his own race. He was more afraid of letting down his peers in Wraith Squadron, or just as bad, appearing weak or indecisive in front of them.

He and Turman drifted at sublight speed toward the X-3Br19 system's largest planet, a silvery gas giant with a dozen moons and a broad ring. As agreed, Turman ran sensors sweeps for unusual minerals or energy signatures, while Scut searched for life signs. By now this was such a routine that Scut barely paid attention to the readouts. Nothing, nothing, and a

whole lot more nothing. The only thing that kept him from falling asleep on these missions was that nagging worry that maybe, just maybe, they'd run into the Vong somewhere.

"Hey, Scut," Turman's voice crackled over his comlink. "I'm picking up water on the third moon."

"Ice, you mean?" Scut asked lazily.

"Not sure. Looks like ice, plus geyser eruptions on the surface."

"Doesn't sound relevant," Scut said, but intensified his own sensor sweep on the moon anyway.

"Temperature readings are patchy too. Probably denotes tectonic instability beneath the moon's surface."

"Are you sure that's our business, Shifter?" Scut asked. Then something lit up on his screen. "Hey, I'm getting organic residue readings from the moon."

"Let's swing by for a closer look," Turman said, and the two X-wings veered onto a direct course for the moon. Its surface seemed to glimmer in the reflected light of the system's primary, and this in turn reflected on the ice particles in the planet's ring.

"Pretty thing, ain't she?" said Turman, and Scut reluctantly grunted agreement.

As they drew closer, Scut's sensor scans became slightly clearer. It looked like there was some organic material floating in low orbit over the moon, which was strange. He felt sweat prickly underneath his helmet, and his heart beat harder in his chest.

"Might have something," Scut said. "Follow me lead. Let's check it out."

Turman sent his affirmative, and Scut plunged closer to the moon. He could see nothing with his naked eye, but the sensors were pointing out small chunks of

organic material drifting in orbit. He followed where the sensors told him to go, and soon he saw tiny flecks of black drifting over the moon's icy surface.

"See it?" Scut said.

"Yeah," Turman replied. "What do we think it is? Debris?"

Yuuzhan Vong debris, of course. It was the only possibility. Scut felt cold settle in his gut as he brought the X-wing closer still. He could make out jagged, twisted shapes, the kind wreckage you'd expect from a small space battle, except all of his readings labelled them organic.

"Hey," he asked Turman, "Anything artificial showing up on your scans?"

"No," Turman said, "Looks like this was a one-sided fight, if that's what it was."

"I don't know what else it could be," Scut admitted. As they drew close to the debris field its contents became clearer still. Fried chunks of yorrick coral, some two or three meters long, drifted in front of his viewport.

"Maybe somebody got ambushed," Turman suggested. "It doesn't look like a big fight..."

"A patrol, maybe," Scut suggested. "Can you pick up any residual energy signatures?"

"Faint, maybe. It's hard to tell. Hey, you see that big chunk over there?"

"Where?" Scut scanned the debris field visually. "Hey, you're right, I think I see something. Not sure what it is though..."

As he flew toward it, though, he recognized the profile. It was about the same size as his X-wing, bulbous in the rear but elongated in the front. The coralskipper's cockpit gleamed in its nose like a

polished gem. Morbid curiosity drew Scut closer. The cockpit's gemlike face was lined with cracks, and part of its aft section looked torn away. It drifted dead in space, and Scut cut the engines on his fighter so he could drift with it. He flipped his fighter so he hovered above the dead coralskipper, aligning his cockpit over the broken gem-face. Part of its surface reflected the moon's silvery glow, but he tried to peer beyond that and see into the cockpit. He thought he saw the head and shoulders of the pilot, still strapped to his vessel, staring dead ahead.

Then the pilot shifted, lifted his head, and stared up at Scut.

"Fierfek!" Turman shouted. "Watch out!"

Scut barely had time to jerk his fighter away before the coralskipper fired its dovin basals to life. The vessel jerked away, pitched upward, and began shooting fiery bursts toward Scut's X-wing. The pilot swore and wrestled with his fighter, pulling away from the debris field.

"A little help here?" he shouted.

"I'm on it," Turman reported, and on his sensors Scut could see his wingmate trying to vector in on the coralskipper. Neither of them had ever faced the Yuuzhan Vong in combat, but they'd seen recordings and played simulations. They knew coralskippers could be far more nimble than any Alliance or Imperial skip, using their dovin basals to slip and slide in all sorts of crazy directions regardless of thrust and momentum. Scut pulled his X-wing into a sharp dive, hoping to give Turman a shot at its broadside.

The skipper followed all right, but it kept weaving from side to side, evading Turman's sprays of laser blasts. Scut veered toward the planet's rings. He

remembered that the best way to break a skipper's defenses was to overwhelm its dovin basal shields, and the countless tiny rocks and ice particles of the planet's ring might just be a good way to do that, assuming his own shields held, which was a decent-sized assumption.

"Hey," Turman barked, "Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

"You got a better idea?" Scut grunted, still bobbing and weaving to keep from being hit.

"If he holds still for second I can get him..."

"If he holds still that means he's already killed me!" Scut snapped. "Hold on, I'm going to try something stupid..."

Scut threw his X-wing into a corkscrew and plunged into the planet's ring. His shield's flared around the cockpit and he slowed his engine to prevent a high-speed collision, though he knew his ship was going to get knocked up regardless. On his rear scanners, he saw the skipper, too, had slowed down, and shunted its power to its forward dovin basals.

"Gotcha!" shouted Turman, and burst of energy lanced into the skipper's aft. The vessel veered off-course, tumbling through the ring. Scut pulled up, out of the ring, but his alarm sensors were still screaming. Damage to his bottom-port S-foil. Damage to his upper-port engine. One torpedo tube out of operation. Well, at least he still had atmosphere in his cockpit.

"Where is it?" squawked Turman. "I lost him. Where'd he go?"

Scut pointed himself back toward the ring and ran scans for organic materials. Nothing came up, but something in the rings might have been messing with his sensors.

"Did you kill it?" he asked Turman.

"I don't know! I couldn't see! He's just gone!"

"Could he have jumped to hyperspace?"

"I don't know? Can these things even do that?"

"I... don't remember," Scut admitted. He'd been studying the Yuuzhan Vong for years, but in his panic he couldn't remember if coralskippers could fly into kriffing hyperspace.

Suddenly he spotted the flare of incoming projectiles. He jerked hard but one exploded just beneath his fighter, rocking him in his cockpit. He spotted the coralskipper's forward profile, its cracked cockpit gleaming like a gemstone in the planet's silver light. It was heading right for him.

"Break off!" shouted Turman.

"No, no I got this!" Scut wrestled with his fighter and brought its nose level with the skipper's. "I got this! I got this!"

"No you don't! Break off!"

"I got this!" Scut shouted, and tapped out two torpedoes from his starboard tube.

His fighter shuddered around him as it fired off both torps. One collided with the skipper's own projectile, creating a flower-blossom of fire and debris. The second burst through the explosion and hit the coralskipper like a punch to the face, shattered the cockpit and nose before exploding the belly of the craft. Scut soared through one explosion, then another, leaving the skipper's burnt-out hull in his wake.

"Wooh!" shouted Turman. "Nice flying!"

Scut looked behind him at the burn-out remains of the coralskipper. The adrenaline drained away and the sinking feeling in his gut returned, only now it was so much worse. He was now the first Alliance pilot to

score a kill against the Yuuzhan Vong in fifteen years. His gut told him he was far from the last.

Jag and Fy'lyor sat the briefing room on *Wessex*, watching a replay of the dogfight at X-3Br19 through the onboard cameras of Turman and Scut's fighters. They sat two spaces apart, and sometimes Jag glanced sideways to see the blue lights of the projections reflected on her stern red features.

"I'll give the Vong credit," she said, "He's quite the pilot."

"Do you mean Scut, or his opponent?"

"Both," she said.

"I think this proves his loyalty, if you were worried."

"Loyalty?" Fy'lyor shrugged. "I never doubted his loyalty to the Alliance, if that's what you mean. But his flying skill is impressive."

"Well," Jag stretched in his chair, "Do we have readings from the second recon team yet?"

"They just came in," Fy'lyor pressed a switch underneath the table. The camera recordings vanished and were replaced by a readout of technical data. "Based on analysis from the debris, we can assume they were destroyed between thirty and forty hours ago. Not including the one the Alliance destroyed, of course."

"It wasn't much debris," Jag said. "Do you think some of it fell into the moon?"

"Almost certainly. The ones still there had retrograde orbits. The question is how much fell into the moon compared to the amount still in orbit."

"It wasn't much debris. Probably just a flight of coralskippers, maybe on recon, were ambushed and destroyed."

“That was my thought, but I think there was more to it than that.” Fy'lyor said, and tapped the table again. The technical data vanished and was replaced by a diagram of the ringed gas giant and its many moon. She tapped again, and the holo zoomed in one one particular moon.

“Take a look at the minerals on that moon,” she said.

Jag nodded. “Perfect for anybody who wants to refuel.”

“Exactly. The unidentified fleet, either in part or whole, must have been refueling here when a Vong recon flight spotted them. Presumably they were able to destroy the flight before it escaped.”

“Either way, that was only about two days ago.” Jag stroked his beard. “Well, I suppose it's a good sign that we're on the right track.”

“Yes, and it also shows we need to proceed with extra caution,” Fy'lyor said.

“And extra thoroughness. I'll talk with SaBinring about stretching out recon mission to four hours instead of three. We don't want to miss anything.”

“Agreed,” Fy'lyor nodded.

As a Wraith, you were expected to put up with odd situations and work under informal circumstances. That had, in fact, been part of the appeal when Myri Antilles joined. However, she had to admit that she had not been expecting *this* kind of unusual circumstance.

Their activities onboard *Wessex* were restricted, which everyone had expected. The Imperial cruiser was fitted with all the newest information-gathering equipment and offered a very tempting target to a squadron full of spies. They were only allowed to move about their quarters (which consisted of two

rooms of bunk beds), the hangar area where their ships were kept, and the common mess hall.

The latter two they had to share with the Imperial crew. It was easier to do that in the hangar. The Imperial techs were competent and professional, and most of the interactions between Wraith and support staff was of a purely technical nature. Nonetheless, many of the Imps looked a little weirded-out by the fact that the Wraiths' chief mechanic was a two-and-a-half-meter-tall female Wookiee, and preferred to act with the human members of the squad.

Sharing the mess hall was stranger. During meals the Wraiths got in line with the Imps to get their food, then gathered at a table in the corner like a clique of schoolkids and talked very quietly among themselves, sparing occasional over-the-shoulder glances at the tables full of Imps, who in turns sneaked their own furtive looks at the Wraiths.

All in all, it was not a comfortable partnership. Therefore, Myri was surprised when she came into the mess hall to see a group of Imperial pilots, half in uniform and half in black flight suits, standing around the table. She felt a spike of alarm and wondered if somebody might be picking a fight, but they didn't look or sound tense.

When she got closer, she saw that they were all listened to Scut and Turman. The two pilots were describing their tangle with the coralskipper, demonstrating maneuvers with their hands and answering questions from the Imperial pilots.

Myri sat down at the other end of the table, where Sharr Latt and Jesmin Tainer were watching.

"This looks civil," she said in a low voice.

"Yeah, who'd have thought," Jesmin said.

Myri had known the tall blonde woman since they were children, and like Myri, Wraith Squadron was in her family. So was the Force; Jesmin's mother Tyria had become a Jedi Knight after her stint as a pilot, and her brother was one as well. Jesmin had some Jedi training, but hadn't been as strong in the Force as her mother or Doran. She often carried around a lightsaber, which was useful for all sorts of things, but on *Wessex* she left it in her quarters, lest it rouse up anti-Jedi sentiment common among the Imps.

"It's a good thing they don't know," muttered Sharr.

The Wraiths' executive officer was the second-oldest in the group after Piggy and had fought in the Yuuzhan Vong War. His hair had been white since Myri could remember, and his tanned dry skin gave his face a curiously ageless quality.

For a second Myri wondered what he meant. Then it clicked. None of the Imps knew there was a Yuuzhan Vong under Scut's masquer, and it was a good thing too.

"How's he holding up?" Myri asked softly.

Jesmin shrugged. Sharr said, "Seems fine to me."

"That's good. But, you know..."

Jesmin shrugged again. Sharr said nothing. The three of them watched as Turman and Scut finished their demonstration. The Imperial pilots thanked them politely and went back to their table.

Now that the event was over, the three of them scooted down to the other end of the table to join the stars of the show.

"Well, *you* kids got popular," Sharr said. "I'm envious."

"They're in awe of our superior flying skills," Turman grinned. "Now we'll get the rest we deserve."

"Technically we don't exist, so we'll *never* get the respect we deserve," Sharr reminded him.

"Damn. Guess we'll have to make up for it be being extra-cheerful."

"Yeah, have fun with that."

"So do we have any idea what is was you ran into?" Jesmin asked.

"I already went over it with Voort," Sharr said. "Fel and the captain think it was the remnants of a Vong patrol that met up with a larger fleet be accident."

"So the renegades, in other words."

"Presumably, though there wasn't enough non-Vong debris to make sure. Either way, it was a minor skirmish, not like the battle the Imps detected before."

"I guess that made us a clean-up crew," Turman said. "Which is fine. If I'm going to get my first taste of fighting the Vong, I'd like to have them outnumbered two-to-one."

"I know that feeling," Jesmin said.

Myri did too. She was not looking forward to going against them herself. She was a decent pilot, but nowhere near as good as her father or Syal, back when Syal had *been* a pilot instead of a desk-jockey.

She asked Scut, "How are you hanging in there?"

"I'm fine," he said, though his tone didn't invite further conversation.

In truth, Myri had no idea what he must have been thinking. She didn't doubt Scut's loyalty to the Alliance, but she also knew he was fascinated as well as repulsed by the Yuuzhan Vong. He'd always insisted that his admiration for their bio-technology was matched by his disdain for the rest of their culture, she always wondered if you could really separate to two so easily.

Since Scut apparently didn't want to talk any more, Sharr said, "Well, we're all going to be on longer patrols now, if you haven't heard. Four hours instead of three."

Jesmin moaned. "I get antsy enough sitting in that cockpit for *one* hour."

"You need to stop being antsy, Ranger," Sharr admonished. "You've got to learn to stick with something."

Jesmin scowled. He was hitting on a sore spot.

He added, "Specifically, stick your butt in the chair and let it stay there. It's actually pretty comfortable. Those pilot seats were designed for long-term sitting, after all."

"I liked it better when I got to run around and cut things with my lightsaber."

"Those were simpler times," Sharr said with an air of false sagacity.

"Maybe we'll get back to 'simpler times' once this mission is over," Turman said.

"Maybe," said Myri, but in her gut she knew, just like the rest of them, that this one mission was probably just the opening volley in a much bigger conflict.

The best they could hope for was to keep the conflict from getting *too* big and spilling into known space. Myri had already been through one war in her adult life, and it had cost a lot of people dearly, especially her sister.

In a way, the Wraiths' mission now was nothing more ambitious than damage control.

Chapter 11

Isolder may have looked like a small, humble shuttle, but it was also the personal transport of the Queen Mother of Hapes, which meant it had a plentiful emergency medical system. Three minutes after the Miy'til fighter awkwardly touched down in the clearing with four people hanging off its wings, they had moved Lowbacca inside and laid him out on a medical table in the main cabin. The shipboard medical droid, a small floating sphere with two thin arms attached, was able to quickly diagnose the wounded Jedi. To everyone's relief, there was no poison in his system, though the claw-wounds on his side meant he wasn't going anywhere.

After that, they fired up the shuttle's HoloNet transceiver and placed a call directly to Luke Skywalker. He had left Hapes about the same time they had, and could have been on Ossus or in the Unknown Regions, but he'd left Jaina with a special emergency encryption key that routed the message to wherever he might be.

When his wavery blue holo-image appeared in the shuttle's cockpit, he looked alarmed. "Hello, Jaina. I see you're using my emergency code."

"That's right," Jaina said as she, Zekk, and Tenel Ka crowded around the holo-projector. Taryn and the pilot were in the main cabin with Lowie. "We've returned to Yavin 4 and were investigating the Great Temple ruins when we were attacked by a voxyn."

"A voxyn?" Luke gaped. "Are you certain?"

"A voxyn or very close to it, Master Skywalker," Tenel Ka said. "It is not the sort of creature one forgets."

"That doesn't make sense. The voxyn clones all had a short life-span, and the war's been over for almost fifteen years. They should all be long dead now."

"I know, but this one was very alive. It wounded Lowie."

Luke looked grim. "Is he all right?"

"He'll recover, though he won't be going anywhere for a while," Jaina said. "Uncle Luke, we hurt the thing and caused it to flee. It looked like it was going for Exar Kun's Temple."

Luke's mouth settled into a grim frown. He looked very old. "Exar Kun is dead, and his spirit no longer haunts that temple. Corran Horn blasted part of it decades ago."

"There still might be some kind of Dark Side energy, or some reason the voxyn might have been drawn there," Jaina said. "Uncle Luke, there may be a nest, or maybe even worse. This voxyn looked pretty hale, and if somebody's growing new ones, well, I don't even want to think about what that might mean."

Luke nodded grimly. The very thought of another Yuuzhan Vong invasion was terrifying to anyone.

"Master Skywalker," Zekk said, "I have to ask. Do you know where Zonama Sekot is? Has anyone been in contact with it in the past decade? Do we have any idea what the Vong have been up to, at all?"

Luke's image stared at him, but said nothing.

"Master Skywalker," Tenel Ka said, "I think it would be best to make a tentative exploration of Exar Kun's temple."

Luke's blue-blurred gaze shifted to her, like he was trying to size up her intentions. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Very well, as long as you proceed with extreme caution. Where is Allana?"

"I have sent her back to Hapes," Tenel Ka said.

"You should be going back too, Your Majesty," Luke said.

"And abandon my friends?" Tenel Ka cocked a red eyebrow. "If that is your order, Grand Master, I will do so, but only as an order."

"It was advice," said Luke.

"Very well," said Tenel Ka, and that was all either needed to say.

"All right," Jaina said, "Uncle Luke, we'll keep in touch. I planned on heading out with Tenel Ka, Zekk, and Taryn. We'll leave Lowie on the ship, under guard, and keep a comlink open at all times."

"Very good. I'll dispatch a team to assist you."

Jaina didn't know if that would be necessary, and she didn't know if it would get there in time, but she didn't argue. It certainly couldn't hurt. "Thank you very much, Uncle Luke."

His eyes scanned all three of them. "May the Force be with you."

"And you, Master Skywalker," said Tenel Ka, and the holo flicked out.

When they went back into the cabin Taryn was already prepping their supply-packs and recharging their blasters.

"How did you know what we'd be doing?" Zekk asked her.

"I can guess," Taryn gave her husband a sly smile. "Traipsing off into the jungle after some Dark Side monster is what I always wanted for my honeymoon."

"Well, it'll be just like old times," Zekk said, and threw a smile back at Tenel Ka and Jaina. Neither returned it, and his own grin wilted. After that they got to work. Fifteen minutes later, they marched out into the jungle.

It was about an hour's walk to Exar Kun's Temple, but they went slowly and cautiously. The three Jedi reached out with the Force, tentatively seeking the same dark, cold feeling associated with the voxyn. Yet the whole time they felt nothing at all, except for the ordinary sensations of a forest full of life: life growing, sleeping, hunting, eating, chattering, calling, loving. In all its messiness it achieved something like balance, and Jaina had spent so long in artificial places like Coruscant that she forgot the natural harmony of Yavin 4's jungles.

It drew her thoughts further, not just to Yavin 4's jungles but to a place even more serene, where all the struggles of life had seemed to sing with joyous music in the Force. That place had been Zonoma Sekot, and if the Yuuzhan Vong really had returned she wondered what could have gone wrong on that paradise world, and what sort of shape it was in now. If even Uncle Luke didn't know where it was, then likely nobody did.

They went through the jungle without speaking for almost a half hour before Zekk interrupted the silence.

He tapped Taryn on the shoulder and said, "Do you see something, over there?"

All three women turned to look where Zekk pointed. Jaina saw no motion except for the slow sway of trees in the breeze, but something did seem odd. A patch of the forest seemed discolored, like two layers of shadows falling over each other. Taryn hefted her rifle and cautiously stepped forward. Zekk raised his rifle as well, and Jaina and Tenel Ka stepped in their wake.

As they walked, Jaina felt a cold shiver run down her spine. She saw Zekk and Tenel Ka stiffen as well, and the three exchanged looks. Taryn, unaware, kept going forward. As they got closer they more clearly saw some kind of camouflage net, drawn tight over a large object. The area surrounding looked trampled and burnt, as though a ship had landed here.

"Ship," Jaina muttered. The camo net couldn't hide what the Force was screaming to her.

"I could guess that," Taryn said. "Somebody must have parked one right in the jungle."

"No," Jaina said, "It's Ship."

Zekk look alarmed. "You mean the Sith Ship, the one Alema Rar had?"

"Alema, and others," Jaina said grimly. After the mad Twi'lek woman had died, the ancient semi-sentient Sith vessel had gone in search of a new owner, and according to most recent reports it had been used by Vestara Khai, the Sith girl who had toyed with Luke and Ben for weeks before finally betraying them.

By now Taryn was getting close to the net, and Jaina reached out with the Force to pull her back. The Hapan woman spun around, shooting an angry glare at Jaina.

"Don't touch it," she said. "It's a Sith vessel. It probably has all kinds of traps on it."

"She's right," Zekk added. "You don't want to get close to that thing."

Tenel Ka scowled. "What is it doing *here*? And how is it connected to the voxyn?"

"Sith breeding voxyn," Zekk shook his head. "Not even my nightmares could come up with that."

Still scowling, Taryn said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't voxyn creatures bred by the Yuuzhan Vong? Some hybrid of Vong biotech and the vornskyrs native to Myrkr? How is it even possible for the Sith to breed them?"

The answer was obvious, but nobody wanted to say it. Some Sith-Vong alliance surpassed everyone's nightmares. Jaina took a deep breath and said, "Come on, let's get to the temple right away."

"You sure you don't want to wait for backup?" Zekk asked.

Jaina looked at the blackened earth beneath Ship. "This thing's probably been here for less than a day. They probably came to search the temple and if that voxyn made it back, they probably already know we're here."

"We could wait here and set a trap for them," Taryn said.

"We're too close to that thing already," Jaina gestured to Ship. "It could be warning them right now. No, we're going to the temple to head them off."

"That could be dangerous, if we're outnumbered," Zekk said.

"Ship isn't very big. It doesn't have room for a whole legion of Sith, especially if they brought voxyn along. No, we're going to do this and we're going to do this now. Understand?" Jaina clenched the lightsaber in her

hand. "We're going to find Vestara Khai and we're going to capture her."

The name lit recognition in everyone's eyes, even Taryn's. The Hapan woman, finally, gave an approving nod. "All right then. We'll follow your lead."

"Thank you," Jaina said crisply, and led them away from Ship. It took another half-hour's walk through the jungle before they reached Exar Kun's temple, but when they did, it was clear that Corran Horn had done a job on it, all those years ago.

The sleek obsidian pyramid still rose high from its square platform in the middle of the mirror-dark lake, but the platform where Exar Kun's statue once stood had been reduced to scorched rubble. The platform, too, was littered with broken stone and debris. Vines had crawled up the sides of the pyramid and crept through cracks in its face.

"He doesn't look so tough," Zekk said, attempting bravado.

His wife seemed unimpressed as she skirted close to the water's edge. "This lake looks deep. Are we going to have to float again?"

"I do not think that will be necessary," Tenel Ka said, and with long nimble strides stepped out across the water. Instead of falling in she seemed to hover atop the surface, leaving shallow ripples with every step. After two long steps she turned around and gave the others the approximation of a smile.

"Stepping stones," Zekk said.

"Quite," Tenel Ka nodded. "They are spaced rather far apart, but you can see them if you look closely."

Zekk followed after her, followed by cautious Taryn and finally Jaina. As they crossed the lake Zekk asked, "So did you use to go exploring here too?"

“Of course,” Tenel Ka said, “Though I admit I never went *inside* the Temple.”

“Well there's a first time for everything,” Zekk said.

When she reached the platform Tenel Ka stopped to consider. “I doubt that, but the Force is full of surprises.”

“So,” Taryn said as she completed her last hop, “Do any of you feel anything Sithy yet?”

The three Jedi attuned themselves to the Force. Jaina did sense something very different from the chaotic harmony of the jungle, but she couldn't tell what. It felt dark and hungry, but without the voxyn's cold determination. It felt frantic almost, confused and desperate and angry. It might have been Vestara.

“Something is in there,” Zekk said.

“We all feel it.” Jaina stepped into the temple's entryway. She held her lightsaber forward and thumbed the blade. Violet energy lanced out into the darkness. She said, “Only one way to find out what it is. Let's go.”

In single file, they followed her into the dark.

Chapter 12

It felt strange, eerie, being in this Tatooine homestead as the sandstorm raged outside. Everywhere he went he could hear the howl of wind and the battering of a million tiny sand particles against the homestead's surface.

It had clearly been through its share of storms. As he explored the place, Ben wondered again and again just how long it had been abandoned. Sand had crept into most places, usually forming a soft carpet across the floor and sometimes clinging to the walls and other crannies and nooks. Even disregarding the sand, everything in the place seemed a mess, like somebody had torn through it before abandoning the place. It couldn't have all come from damage from sandstorms, not in the lower tunnels that mostly escaped natural damage.

Again, it was hard to tell how long the place had been abandoned. They found glowrods, complete with batteries that helped them explore. The dry desert air was a remarkable preservative, and when Ben stumbled into the kitchen he found vegetables still in the cupboards, dried out to the point of being brittle white husks, but still intact.

He tried to get into the upper dome of the homestead. He had to climb up a stairwell coated in sand, at times dropping on all fours like he had when clambering blind up the Mos Eisley landing pad. Most of the upper room had been coated in sand as well, and Ben had to stuff a cloth over his mouth to keep from breathing in the dust he disturbed with every step. He went to the front entrance as quick as he could and slammed the door shut, sealing the room off from the sandstorm. As he scanned the room with his glowrod he found more signs of struggle: a pair of overturned chairs, a table still topped with dishes, and a bowl filled with some calcified liquid. His heart skipped a beat when his light shone on the walls: Blaster marks, almost a dozen of them, scored the white plaster. Cracks run across the walls. They'd probably first been made by the blaster-shots, after which they'd crept their way through the plaster as the years went by.

Ben went down the stairs slowly and carefully. This place was growing more haunting by the minute, and he wondered what could have happened to this homestead. Tuskens presented one obvious possibility, though they didn't seem the kind to spray a dining room with blasterfire. He would have also expected them to have scavenged the hangar more thoroughly, but apparently that hadn't been the case.

So who else, then? Ben supposed any kind of bandits could roam the desert, attacking helpless moisture farmers. It was yet another reminder of what a wild world this was, savage and far beyond civilization. His father often talked about Tatooine with a touch of nostalgia, like it was a quiet place where no big problems ever reached, a place a young man wanted to run from and an old man wanted to return to. But so far,

Ben's trip to Tatooine had been anything but peaceful. He'd been shot at, crashed his ship, almost died in the desert more than once, and was now imprisoned in this homestead full of ghosts and the memory of anonymous violence.

He wandered through the tunnels again until he found his way back to the hangar. When he'd left, Tahiri had been here, investigating the equipment for anything useful, though after all these years Ben doubted there was much aside from half-drained batteries and clunky old glowrods. Now she was gone. Ben opened himself to the Force, just a little, and felt her elsewhere in the complex.

He sighed and sat down. A lot of equipment was strewn about on the floor: hyperspanners, batteries, manual ratchets, cans of dried-up oil. Everything you'd expect to find in a moisture farmer's garage. He sighed and inspected the XP-40, bending low to brush out some of the sand that had already nearly clogged its innards. He went over to the cockpit to see just how much dust had reached it, too, when he saw a datapad sitting in the pilot's seat.

He reached in and picked it up. Tahiri must have left it there, though why, he had no idea. He flicked the switch, wondering if the thing still worked after all this time. Its screen flickered once, twice, then shuddered off. Ben gave the thing a hard smack with his palm and it flickered the life again. The screen showed blue haze, like old two-dimensional screens usually did. He smacked it a second time and suddenly he had audio. Crackly, fuzzy audio, but audio nonetheless.

"...wouldn't believe.... really miss.... in for a....." The datapad buzzed. The screen was still a mess of static. "Anyway.... really think..... good luck, Luke...."

Luke?

That was impossible. It had to be. Ben smacked the datapad again and again. The audio suddenly conked out but the video came on. It was still fuzzy, but he could clearly make out faces. A young man, barely older than Ben, with a thin face and dark mustache leaned in front of the screen. He was talking enthusiastically and soundlessly. His eyes were bright. A few more heads hovered behind him, smiling, sometimes talking, either to the screen or each other.

Suddenly the video winked out. The screen went blank except for the simple words: "Replay? Return?"

Ben thumbed the control switch on the datapad and selected the first option. Suddenly the video returned, this time with audio.

"Hey, Luke, how have you been?" The young man with the mustache said. There was nobody behind him. He seemed to be sitting in a dorm or barracks. Bunkbeds lined the wall behind him.

"Well, we're doing fine here on *Rand Ecliptic*. Still protecting and serving the galaxy, if you can believe that. It's a lot different from the Academy though. I mean, you expect service to be different than the Academy, but you're never really prepared for it."

The man tried to keep smiling, but Ben could see it waver. Someone tall and thin, hair cut short, came up behind the mustached man and said, "Hey Biggs, who're you talking to?"

Biggs! Biggs Darklighter, it had to be! Ben had heard about Biggs surely enough. Luke's old friend who had joined the Empire before defecting to the Rebellion. He and Luke had been reunited very briefly on Yavin 4, shortly before Biggs had died protecting Luke during the attack on the first Death Star.

Ben found his hands shaking. He was short of breath. He was not just holding history in his hands, he was holding something personal, and that was impossibly more important.

“Just leaving a message for a friend back home,” Biggs said.

“Oooh, is it a pretty girl?” A third man said. “What was her name, Camie?”

“No, it's not her,” Biggs sighed. “Sorry to disappoint, Klivian.”

“Never hurts to ask,” the third man said.

“Anyway,” Biggs said to the screen, “We're all doing okay here. I know you feel like you missed out, not going to the Academy and everything, but, well, maybe it wasn't a bad choice. I never thought I'd miss that old dustball you're on, but once you get into the thick of things, well, the galaxy can be a pretty complicated place. You wouldn't believe it, but I really miss Anchorhead sometimes.”

His face got serious as he said, “Listen Luke, we're in for a busy couple of weeks, so I don't know when I'll get a chance to send another message.”

“Hey, keep it simple, Biggs,” another man said

“Okay, okay,” Biggs said. His tone was joking but his eyes were serious. “Anyway, I really think you should take some time, think about whether you really want to go to the Academy. Either way, I wish you good luck, Luke. I'm sure you'll make the right call.”

There was a bit of static, then the video resumed. “Anyway, Luke, tell Fixer and Camie I miss them but all's well.”

“Oooh, Caaamie,” one of the men, Klivian, teased.

“Hey, cut it out!” Biggs laughed. The other men did too.

“What about your friend Luke?” another man asked. “Does he have a girl back home?”

“I don't know, do you, Luke?” Biggs asked the screen. “Well, I hope you do. I hope you settle down and.... Well, no, I won't say that. I hope you do what you think's best. That's what we're gonna do, Luke. We're gonna do what we think's best.”

“Hey, Darklighter...” a voice said, lightly warning.

“Right, right,” Biggs waved a hand. “Just remember that. I did what I thought was best, and so should you. I'm not sure when I'll see you again Luke, but I'm sure I will someday. Until then, keep flying straight. Biggs out.”

The video winked out. The screen came up again: “Replay? Return?”

Ben put the datapad down. His hands were shaking. His breathing was fast. He stumbled over to the closest bench and sat down on its dusty surface. He held his head in his hands and breathed in, breathed out, steadying himself against the assault of so many old ghosts. He was a Jedi, and he knew how to calm himself like a Jedi should.

Eventually, when his breath and head were stable, he picked up his head and looked at the datapad's blue screen, still shining dimly atop the landspeeder's hood. He walked across the room, picked it up, and switched it off.

Only then did he realize that the hail of sand no longer pounded on his door. Finally, it was silent.

Tahiri sat at the base of an old moisture vaporator, watching the suns set.

One brilliant disc was slightly larger than the other as they both slid down toward the clear line of the horizon.

The sandstorm was now just a haze in the southern distance, barely visible as the cloak of darkness fell gradually from the east. In the west, a corona of scarlet and gold hovered around the setting suns, turning the pale, blank desert landscape into a sea of deep red. Soon the suns would be gone, and sky and sand alike we plunge into utter blackness. And when the last light of day had faded, you would be able to look up and see a billion stars spangled on the night sky.

Tahiri had almost forgotten the beauty of Tatooine. Almost.

She remained seated as she heard the sound of footsteps. She waited until Ben sat down next to her to ask, "Pretty, isn't it?"

Ben said nothing. He sat with his butt in the sand, resting his elbows on his knees. He watched the desert shift colors and transform before his very eyes. Tahiri didn't press him. When the first sun started to slip beneath the horizon line, he finally said, "This was my father's home."

"I know."

"This sunset..." he said, and trailed off.

"I know."

"There's.... signs of violence. All over. Dad said the stormtroopers came and killed Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru. That was when he decided to join Obi-Wan Kenobi, and go to Mos Eisley, and that was where he met Uncle Han, and then they flew to Alderaan and got captured by the Death Star and met Aunt Leia, and.... and...."

He trailed off. The suns were setting fast. The first one was already half-eclipsed by darkening land.

"Everything started here," he said.

They watched the first sun slide into the horizon. The second one began to disappear as well. Tahiri said, "I found some old maps. They give us the heading to Anchorhead. Normally this isn't the place to go driving in the dark, but I think it'd be okay. We won't be going fast anyway, and we want to try and head her off before she can go to Mos Eisley."

Ben didn't respond. He kept staring ahead at the last glimmers of day.

"We shouldn't wait long," she said.

The rim of the second sun seemed to linger for a long time on the horizon before, finally, it slipped beneath the division line and disappeared. The suns' red glow lingered in the western sky, slowly turning to violent and then to black, while the sky grew deeper and deeper with stars.

"That was beautiful," Ben said. "Harsh. But beautiful."

"I know," Tahiri said. "But there's a whole big galaxy out there, and a lot of things we need to do."

"Yeah," said Ben, and sniffed back a tear. "You're right."

"Of course I am," said Tahiri. "I'm older and wiser than you."

She got to her feet and dusted off her bottom. She offered Ben a hand and helped the teenager to his feet. They lingered for a minute, wordlessly watching twilight fade, before they walked back to the homestead.

Chapter 13

It was hard to believe there was anything left inside Exar Kun's temple, but Jaina could feel something. When Corran Horn had blasted the place thirty years ago, he'd done a good job of razing the temple's upper structure. Beyond the entry portal, they found a mess of burnt, tumbled obsidian, illuminated by pools of sunlight spilling through the cracks in the ceiling. Jaina thought she saw a few statues, broken in pieces, staring up at her with half-ruined faces. In the time since its destruction, the temple ruins had been gradually overcome by the jungle, and now tangles of creeper vine wound everywhere.

There shouldn't have been anything here, but there was.

"I can sense it," Zekk said grimly. "I can't tell what it is exactly, or where, but I can definitely sense it."

"Beneath us," muttered Tenel Ka. Jaina could feel them both stretching out with the Force. "There must be lower layers to this place."

Taryn Zel, looking slightly discomfited by her Jedi companions, had a portable scanner out. "I'm searching

for life signs, but I'm not getting much. Something in the temple's structure is interfering with sensors."

"Let's see if there's a staircase or a shaft leading deeper underground," Jaina said, holding her lightsaber tight. "Either way though, I doubt we'll have to search for long. If Ship hasn't warned them, they'll probably sense our presence right now, just like we're sensing theirs."

"What about the voxyn?" Taryn asked. She pocketed her sensor array, unshouldered her rifle, and clutched it with both hands.

"I don't feel it," Jaina said, "But I didn't feel it in the Great Temple either, not until it was too late."

"I feel obliged to point out that this rifle doesn't have a stun setting," Taryn said, looking at the three Jedi and settling her gaze on Jaina.

Jaina nodded, but said nothing. She didn't want to kill Vestara- not because she hoped to redeem the girl, or redeem much of anything any more- but because something important was going on and only a live prisoner could give information.

The four spread out to search the rubble. The Jedi stretching out with their feelings, trying to locate something unusual in this dark, debris-filled space. They searched for several minutes before Zekk, from the far corner of the room, called them over. He had uncovered a hole in the floor, revealing a very narrow staircase that spiraled down into darkness.

"Well," Taryn breathed, "Who goes first?"

"I'll go," Jaina said. Her mouth felt dry and her voice cracked. No one objected to the Sword of the Jedi leading the way.

The stairwell was barely wide enough for one person to squeeze down, and Jaina was lucky to have a small

body and nimble step. Likely Lowbacca wouldn't have been able to fit at all. She kept her lightsaber ignited, filling the surrounding area with a dim violet glow, while her other hand gently touched the inner wall for stability. The others followed behind her, but the staircase was so narrow that they had to walk at staggered distances.

Jaina wasn't sure how long it took to get to the bottom of the stairwell, but it felt like it took forever. She found herself in a dark space, and it wasn't until Taryn came down and activated the glowrod mounted on her rifle that they could see the space more clearly. It was a much larger chamber than she'd expected, wide on all sides, with a low-vaulted ceiling. A doorway sat on the far side of the room, two wooden doors torn off their hinges and lying in the dust. Old statues lined the sides of the chamber, carved from some red stone, bearing the horned features of ancient Massassi.

"Well," Taryn asked, "What do those Jedi senses tell you?"

"There's something up ahead all right," Jaina said.

"What is it? Vestara Khai? Voxyn?"

"I don't know." Jaina shook her head. "I feel...."

"Something very, very cold," Zekk said. His voice trembled with a shiver.

He was right, Jaina thought. Not the mix of anger and confusion she associated with Vestara Khai, nor the animal hunger of the voxyn. She felt the Force aura of someone, or something, else.

"We should go forward," Tenel Ka pointed her silver lightsaber toward the door. "If they are waiting for us, there's no sense in delaying."

"If they're waiting for us, we might as well call out and attempt a parley," Taryn said. "Unless we don't expect that to work with Sith."

"I wouldn't count on it," Zekk said.

Jaina was about to agree when she heard the snap-hiss of an igniting lightsaber. A warm red glow filled the distant doorway, and a large, dark shape filled the space. Too large for Vestara, had to be a male. The glow of his saber underlit a dark-robed figure, cowl hung lower over his face. Jaina could make out a human-shaped jaw, streaked with black war-paint or tattoos.

"Surrender now and we won't harm you," Jaina said. It was a formal offer of leniency, nothing more, and they both knew it.

The dark robed figure remained the doorway, red blade held to the side. He said nothing. Jaina still couldn't see his face.

"If you fight us here, you will not leave Yavin alive," Tenel Ka said in her most commanding voice.

Finally, just as Jaina started to think he might be some statue, the man shook his head. He shifted his stance, gripping the lightsaber in both hands and pointing it toward them.

That was when Jaina felt a stab of energy in the Force, cold and hungry.

"Voxyn!" she screamed, just as the wall to their left exploded. Dust and old stone gushed into the chamber, and above the crashing rumble was the horrible nightmare wail of a wounded voxyn.

The creature slammed into Tenel Ka, swiping at the queen with its massive claws. Tenel Ka rolled to the side while Taryn dropped to one knee and fired a volley of shots from her rifle. The laser-blasts left

smoking wounds in the voxyn's tough hide, and the creature wailed once more as Zekk Force-pushed Tenel Ka out of the way of its flailing tail, skidding the Queen Mother across the dusty room. Then he leaped forward, trying to stab his saber into the voxyn's belly. His lightsaber seemed to hiss as it pierced the animal's rough hide, but again the voxyn flailed, tossing Zekk to the floor. Its tail flailed once more, snapping like a whip against the old stone floor. Zekk tried to move out of the way, but was too late. The tail cracked down on his left leg, breaking bone. His scream was drowned out by the voxyn's as Taryn's blasts caught it in throat.

Jaina barely saw any of it. She was fighting the Sith.

His lightsaber was a red whirl, a constant volley of blows. Jaina kept on raising her blade to parry, but never managed to find the time to strike out with a thrust of her own. The Sith kept on forcing her back, closer to the place where her friends were fighting the voxyn. As she fought the Sith his hood fell back and she could see a bit of his face: the sickly red-gold eyes of a Dark Side-user, the streaks of black that covered his face in ornate designs, the needle-like teeth that grinned in his mouth. It was a ferocious energy she hadn't felt since she fought and killed her own brother.

Behind her, the voxyn thrashed in pain, gasping for breath. Tenel Ka had stumbled to her feet, and this time it was she who pushed Zekk out of the way of the rampaging animal. The voxyn charged for Taryn, and Tenel Ka frantically felt out through the Force, trying to find her lightsaber in the dark and rubble-strew room. Taryn, still clutching her rifle, rolled out of the way of the charging beast, giving way for it to skid to a halt, spin around, and come at her again. Taryn, lying prone on the ground, hefted her rifle and began firing again

and again, pumping smoking laser-blasts into the animal's face and heavy shoulders, causing it to stumble but not halt.

Then a silver lightsaber snapped to life, pinwheeled through the air, and lodged itself blade-first into the voxyn's left eye.

The creature fell almost immediately. It was dead before it had to change to cry out. As it collapsed to the floor Taryn looked to the fight still taking place in the other side of the room, where a hail of red seemed to be constantly falling against Jaina Solo's violet blade. In the darkness it was impossible to tell where either body was, Jedi or Sith, but Taryn didn't hesitate to heft her rifle and fire.

The Sith attacking Jaina suddenly stumbled, grunted. His saber dropped and Jaina didn't hesitate to raise her lightsaber and bring it down for the killing blow.

Another red blade shot out to catch it. Jaina looked down, stunned at the form that had suddenly interposed itself between her and the wounded Sith. One this face there was no glowing eyes, no needle-sharp teeth, no paint or elaborate tattoos. She looked down into the pretty white face and violet eyes of a teenage girl.

"Sorry I'm late, Master," Vestara Khai gritted her teeth and pushed Jaina a step back.

"Better late than never," grunted the Sith behind her. He stumbled to his feet and said, "Come."

A second later they were gone, racing up the narrow stairwell. Jaina looked around, stunned, to see the three others in the room. Taryn was crouched over Zekk, who groaned as he clasped a wounded leg. Tenel Ka was still on her feet, silver lightsaber in hand. The two women looked at each other across the dust and gloom

and nodded once. Then they turned and raced up the stairwell, after their prey.

Darth Vidious gave her no thanks for saving her life, but she hadn't expected any either.

Instead they raced up the stairwell, through the rubble-strewn foyer of the temple, and out onto the mirror-dark pool. The sun was getting low over the jungle, casting the sky in shades of gold and bloody red. Vestara could feel them behind her: the familiar Force-aurea of Jaina Solo, burning like a bright determined flame. And beside her, an aura just as bright, driven not by Jaina's feelings of determination but by something else, something deeper, more intimate. If so, then Vestara had seen correctly in that dark crypt. She was being chased by Tenel Ka, Queen Mother of Hapes, whose daughter Vestara had betrayed to the Lost Tribe of the Sith.

Darth Vidious was not of the Lost Tribe. Even wounded he moved faster, with more agility and rage, than the Lost Tribe ever could. He plunged into the forest, head low, lightsaber held ahead to clear out the foliage. Vestara followed in his wake, clutching the satchel to her chest, looking over her shoulders into the shadow-streaked red forest. She saw the bobbing of lightsabers, silver and violet, approaching from behind. Vestara didn't know if they could make it to Ship in time.

She didn't know a lot of things. She didn't know anything about Darth Vidious, aside from the power he clearly held in the Force and the attraction he had to Ship. His power had attracted her to him when he had found her and Ship both, hiding in orbit over the moon of Raxus Prime. She wondered if he might be

connected to the hidden Sith presence she'd felt when she, Jaina Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Ben had investigated Korriban three years ago. But he didn't answer. He just promised to tell her more if she helped him retrieve the lost Sith holocrons of Exar Kun and Naga Sadow from Yavin 4. Maybe he was lying, maybe not. Vestara didn't care. She had no one else in the galaxy now.

Not that she blamed anyone but herself for that. The time spent traveling with Luke Skywalker and Ben had made her weak, and drawn her away from everything she'd known as part of the Sith. Watching father and son trade quips and loving conversation both had thrown her world into confusion, and in that confusion she'd fallen into something even worse: love. Love for Ben Skywalker, that smiling boy with the red hair and blazing blue eyes, who had promised, really promised, that he could make her into a Jedi and give her the life he said she'd deserved all along.

But that was a long time ago. Now she ran.

She followed Vidious toward Ship. She felt Ship in her mind, a warm presence welcoming her to the only home she had left. She didn't know if Ship talked to Vidious; it never said, and neither did Vidious. She hoped it didn't, because if Ship would respond to Vidious' commands, she fully expected both to abandon her here to the mercy of two angry Jedi.

When they got the clearing, Vidious threw a shock wave out with the Force, knocking back the camouflage tarpaulin they'd thrown over Ship. In the late-afternoon light the Sith vessel looked especially grotesque, with its panels spread out from either end like bat-wings, each flanking a central pod that looked like some ever-staring blood-red eye.

As they approached the entry hatch at the back of Ship, Vidious turned and shouted, "Vestara, the Holocrons! Now!"

She obeyed without thinking. She slung the sack off her shoulder and tossed it to the Sith warrior, who held it up with one hand and cried to Ship, "We have it now! I have your masters in my hand!"

And lo, the hatchway opened.

Was that it? Vestara send her thoughts to Ship. You obey him, just like that?

But Ship was silent. She hated it when Ship went silent. It was the only friend she had left.

Vidious plunged inside, holding the sack tight to his chest. Before Vestara could follow, she heard the hum of lightsabers and spun around to see both of them standing there, sweating and panting but with fierce determination in their eyes: The Sword of the Jedi and the Queen of Hapes.

Vestara ignited her lightsaber and held it in a high defensive position. Jaina Solo snapped, "Stand down, Vestara!"

Vestara heard Ship's engines hum to life. Its ancient repulsor-jets shot hot air into the clearing. Ship was leaving her, just like everything else.

"Stand down!" Solo shouted.

Vestara lunged.

She pushed Solo back on the first blow, but Tenel Ka came at her from the side. The Queen Mother only had one arm to fight with, and instead of a heavy swing she lunged forward with a fencer's one-handed thrust. The tip of her silver blade stabbed Vestara in the side, burning through her clothes and sending stark pain through her gut. Vestara doubled over in pain but kept

on her feet, kept clinging to her saber. The two Jedi stood there, two paced away from her waiting.

"Stand down," Solo said again.

"I'll never let you kill me," Vestara gritted her teeth, picked up her head, and glared at Solo.

"Don't make us, Vestara." There was no mercy in her eyes.

"That's what Jedi do, isn't it? Kill Sith?" Vestara felt like her guts might spill out of her at any moment, but she still found the strength to shout over the roar of Ship's engines. "You'd kill all of us... even your own brother!"

Words thrust deeper than any saber could. Then Vestara lunged at Tenel Ka, swinging with both hands to drive the one-armed queen back. She did her best to block each blow but Vestara got close enough to rear up on one leg and deliver a thrust-kick into the Queen Mother's gut.

By that time Jaina Solo had recovered from her shock and swung down on Vestara. The Sith girl pivoted, parried the blow, then duck low and spun, swinging her lightsaber for Jaina's legs. The Sword of the Jedi jumped high over it then came down swinging; Vestara ducked, rolled through the grass, and came up close to Tenel Ka.

The Queen Mother was already swinging down but Vestara parried it with ease, then shifted her saber and stabbed for the woman's legs. The woman took a glancing blow to the calf, grunted once in pain, then stabbed down again. Vestara couldn't bring her saber up in time to deflect and took a jab to the chest, just below the left collar bone. She fell back on her haunches and raised her saber to deflect another of Tenel Ka's blows, but she could do nothing when Jaina

came in from behind and swung down hard on her left shoulder.

Vestara screamed in white agony as Jaina's saber cleaved through her shoulder, shearing off her left arm. Somehow, through all the pain, she still clung to her lightsaber, the only thing left for her in the world, holding it up in front of her like a pathetic shield, the only thing standing between her and annihilation at the hands of two brutal Jedi.

Then she heard the hum of a third lightsaber, even above the roar of Ship's engines. She pried her eyes open, and through the pain and the streaks of blood-red sunset-light she could see the black figure of Darth Vidious, dancing between to the two Jedi women. Lightsabers spun, clashed, sharked. She felt the ground disappear beneath her and knew she was dying. Vision blurred and faded to blackness. She felt wind, hot wind on her face, like Ship taking off, though she was beyond hearing the roar of its engines, or anything at all. As much as she could feel anything she felt surprised. Surprised at how easy it was to die, after trying so hard to stay alive and losing everything in the process.

Then she felt pain again, a sharp stinging on her cheek, like the slap of a leather-gloved hand. Darkness became light: the dim light of a vessel's interior. She heard the sound of engines, now low, as though from a ship in flight. Not just any ship, of course. It was her Ship. Formless light blurred to shapes. She saw the face of Darth Vidious hanging over her, smiling with those pointed teeth. He had his hood pulled back now, revealing his Devaronian horns.

"What... What happened?" Vestara's words her slurred. Her lips were heavy. Had he given her some

kind of drug? Was she dying? Everything around her seemed distant, dreamlike.

“You fought well, Vestara Khai.” Vidious grinned. “This is your reward.”

“Reward....” She muttered.

“We’ll see what we can do about that arm of yours,” he said. “But in the meantime, relax. We have a long flight ahead of us.”

“You... you saved me... I thought....”

“Did you think I would abandon a specimen as brave as you?” Vidious shook his head. “You give us too little credit, Vestara Khai.”

She felt her consciousness sliding back into whatever drug-addled sleep she’d emerged from. “Who... us...”

“Soon to be ‘we,’ I expect,” Vidious said as all things faded to black. “You should make a fine addition to the One Sith.”

Chapter 14

On Coruscant, you never saw the stars, not even if you were standing at the peak of the Manari Mountains at the dead of night. The artificial light generated by hundreds of billions of living beings eradicated any hope of that.

It was better if you went to other worlds, but in big cities you still ended up with the same problem. If you went to Coronet on Corellia, Salis Da'ar on Bakura, or Oradin on Brentaal IV, the city light always drowned out the stars. Even on humble, dirty Mos Eisley, the city lights had the effect of dimming the stars, like you were viewing them through a translucent screen.

Not so with Anchorhead. On Anchorhead, you could see every light in the sky.

Miranda didn't have much time to stargaze. The old landspeeder she'd stolen from the old homestead desperately needed a radiator replacement, and in a hole like this there weren't any mechanic stores open in the middle of the night. She'd tried knocking on doors, but that hadn't gotten her anything except threats of violence if she tried it again. Which left her rummaging around the miscellaneous scrap of Tosche

Station. That station master told her most of the stuff was decades old and probably didn't work. Since the exact same thing could be said about her landspeeder, she decided to keep searching.

Unfortunately, she wasn't coming up with much now. She'd done a cursory scan already, then wandered out into the town's dusty streets in search of some open tapcafe. She didn't need ale right now, just some stimulant to keep her fresh. She'd slept a little during the day, after reaching the abandoned homestead, but she'd only permitted herself a few hours' sleep. After that she'd barely made it to Anchorhead before the sandstorm came and shut the whole town down, but all the time she'd been more worried about the Jedi on her tail. She didn't *know* they were will after her- she'd definitely managed to crash their Y-wing- but these were *Jedi*, after all. They didn't give up, not ever. She'd only trust they were dead if she put a blaster bolt in them herself.

She was coming back to Tosche Station now after finding a place that sold cheap stimulant drinks. After shaking off the drunken affections of a moisture farmer old enough to be her grandfather, she was full of energy. She walked fast, and didn't look up at the myriad stars. Last night, trekking across the open desert, she'd felt like they were ready to swallow her up. It was strange, coming home for the first time.

Not home, of course. Tatooine had never been home, never would. Her father's home, yes, but her father was long dead, her mother dead longer, and Miranda was alone. She'd come to Tatooine expecting it to be full of strange ghosts, and she was right.

Tosche Station was empty this time of night except for the stationmaster, an old Klatooinan who Miranda

saw slumped in his chair, sleeping, through the windows to his office. She walked past his office, down the hall to the garage. She flicked on the lights and went straight to the pile of scrap she'd been sorting through earlier. Like her father before her, she was a good mechanic. She had a natural feel for machinery and the vehicles that used them. So she didn't have to look at each piece of equipment long to determine if it was useful or not.

They were all useless. Now she was just double-checking.

As she went through the second time, making absolutely sure, she glanced around the garage. There was her landspeeder, with its broken radiator. There was a newer SoroSuub model, XF-something, which wouldn't have interchangeable parts. She'd seen an old T-16 airspeeder outsider and wondered if that might have what she needed. She doubted the sleepy garage manager would notice if she plundered some of his intact craft. At least, he wouldn't notice until she was well on her way to Mos Eisley, if not offworld entirely. But would a T-6 have what she needed? The airspeeder was Incom, hers was SoroSuub, but it was old enough. She might be able to figure something out.

She got to her feet, tossing an old flux capacitor to the floor. She turned for the door, patting the datapad that bulged in her vest pocket to make sure it was there. She would have noticed it falling out, of course, but she needed to reassure herself it was there.

Then something smacked into her, like an invisible wall. She took two steps back, wincing in pain. She tried to bring her hand up to her face, but she couldn't move it. She tried the other hand too, but nothing. It

was like binders had clasped down on her limbs, holding them in the air.

Jedi! She realized, just before she heard the *snap-hiss-humm* of a lightsaber.

She could turn her head, just barely. She saw the glow of the blade spread softly across the dim garage. Footsteps approached from behind. Then she felt something clamp down on her wrists, something metal, flexible but firm. The Force-grip on her body did not relax, even as the metal chord pinned her wrists behind her back.

If she could have reached her blaster, she would have shot herself through the heart. Better death than capture by the Jedi. Better death than failure.

Finally, the invisible grip on her body released. She almost collapsed to the ground, but another grip, this one firm flesh, took her by the shoulders and sat her down on a bench in the middle of the garage.

Finally, she could see her attackers. The same ones as in the Mos Eisley alley: the teenage Jedi, with the red hair, and behind him, lightsaber ignited, the short blonde woman.

"Kill me," Miranda insisted, eyes on the lightsaber. "Do it. Do it now."

The blonde woman shook her head and shut off her blade. The garage was dark again, and quiet.

"We're not here to kill you," the boy said.

"Do it anyway," she hissed. "I'll never talk."

"We don't need you to," the boy said. He squatted in front of her and carefully reached for her vest. He pulled the datapad out of its inner flap and turned it on. He couldn't have understood what he saw; Miranda took some comfort in that, though he'd figure it out eventually.

The boy walked over to the blonde woman. She looked familiar from somewhere, though Miranda couldn't quite place her. The boy said, "Well, this is what Traygo was carrying."

The woman looked at the datascreen. "Looks like location coordinates. Not sure for where, though. We'd have to plug it into a navcomputer."

"Sounds good to me. We just need to get back to Mos Eisley," the boy said and stuffed the datapad in his jacket. He turned his gaze on Miranda. "What do you think we should do with her?"

"Take her with us," the woman said. "I doubt the Mos Eisley police care who killed Traygo, but she belongs with them, not us."

"That's it?" Miranda twisted in her seat and glowered. "That's all? You're not going to interrogate me? Burn me with your fancy sabers? Use Jedi mind tricks?"

"I don't know if you've been listening to too much of Daala's propaganda or what," the boy said, "But Jedi don't torture, and mind tricks only work on the weak-minded. You don't seem the type."

"So you're one of those peace-and-love Jedi," Miranda sniffed. "Sorry. I thought I was getting the Jacen Solo type. It's hard to keep track anymore."

Both their faces turned to stone. The woman especially seemed grave. Then it clicked, finally. Miranda said, "I know you! You're Tahiri Veila! You killed Admiral Pellaeon!" She gave her best angry smile. "Weren't you supposed to be executed or something?"

The blond woman stared cold eyes from across the room. "I'm atoning. In my own way."

"Oh, sure, never mind the trial-by-jury thing. So are you Jedi, like, officially above the law now that you

left Coruscant? Outside the law? It's all pretty confusing."

"Yes. It is." Veila stayed where she was, but the boy took a few steps closer.

Not close enough. Miranda leaned forward, sharpened her predatory gaze, and tried to draw him in. "So one of you is an escaped murderer. Who's the other one? Red hair, about my age.... You're not Ben Skywalker, are you?"

He didn't speak, but his face told enough.

"Oh, wow!" Miranda laughed despite herself. "I really was chased by two of the most famous Jedi ever! I guess I should congratulate myself on getting this far. So why'd you come after me? Or did you just stumble on me? Was this some kind of Tatooine reunion trip? Were you going to check out your dad's home planet? Hey, Luke Skywalker isn't here, is he?"

The Skywalker boy scowled. "No he's not. And we were tracking Traygo. Sorry, we don't even know who you are. I guess you're not important enough."

"Shame," Miranda sighed. She needed to get him closer still. "You know, I'd have loved to meet Luke Skywalker. My dad met him, a long time ago. Said he was a great guy..."

That peaked his interest. He took a few steps closer. "Who is your father?"

"*Was*," Miranda said sharply. "*Was* my father. His name was Cole Fardreamer and he was the deck chief on the *Resilience*. He died when she went down at Fondor, fighting Jacen Solo."

That shook them, both of them. Fondor, where Veila had killed Admiral Pellaeon. Fondor, where another costly battle had been fought, fifteen years back. Fondor, where Miranda had lived almost all her life,

and where Tatooine was only a word and foreign memory. Fondor, which wasn't home any more.

"That name sounds familiar," Skywalker said. He took a step closer. "Cole Fardreamer..."

"He helped your father once," Miranda said softly. He stepped closer. "During the crisis on Alamania. You remember Kueller? *Another* of your dad's students tried to play tyrant. He was putting bombs into droids and blew up the Senate Hall, plus other places. My dad was just a deck scrubber then, but he went all the way to the droid factories on Telti to help your dad stop the plot."

"I remember that story," Skywalker said. Another step closer. "He was just a kid from Tatooine then."

"Right," Miranda nodded. "But meeting Luke Skywalker, helping him to save the galaxy, that was the high point of my father's life. He told it again and again. He always insisted Skywalker's Jedi could do no wrong. Even when Jacen Solo went crazy. Even when they killed his wife."

"Your mother?" Skywalker took another step. So close now. One more should do it, but somehow, Miranda didn't want to stop talking. She wanted him to know. She wanted to share her pain.

"He married another deck hand," she said. "She died at Fondor too, way back, during the Vong war. She died because one of your peace-and-love Jedi refused to fire Centerpoint and wipe out the Vong fleet, so some clown did it instead and wiped out half the Republic shipyards. That was months after she gave birth to me. I never knew her."

"His name was Anakin," Veila said. Her voice trembled. "It was one of the hardest choices he ever had to make. He regretted it, you know. He was angry

at his brother. Jacen was the one who convinced him not to fire.”

Miranda snorted. “So Jacen was peace-and-love then? Stang, what happened to him?”

Neither of them spoke. They looked very, very sad.

“You want to know something else?” Miranda said. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. She didn't have to fake them.

“Tell me,” Skywalker said. He scooted close, so very close.

“Do you really want to?” Miranda lowered her voice.

“Tell me,” Skywalker repeated. He leaned in close enough to hear a whisper. Beyond the red corona of his hair, Miranda saw Veila tense.

“You kriffing Jedi need to mind your own business,” Miranda choked.

Then she sprung.

She rocked back and brought both legs up, wrapped around Skywalker's torso in a right lock. He was bigger than her, but she was able to take him by surprise and knock him off-balance. She flipped backward, right off the stool, tucking her head forward so she could roll. Skywalker planted head-first onto the cold floor, and Miranda twisted her slim body enough to pluck the lightsaber hanging off his belt. Still wrestling on the floor with Skywalker, she felt one end, then the other, and found the switch in between.

She turned it on.

She could barely hear the *snap* of her binds against the pain shooting up her arm. She screamed out loud, and so did Skywalker. Miranda kept rolling, though, forcing back the pain in her left side. With her right she clutched the lightsaber, now turned off. She forced herself to her feet, hauling Skywalker up with her. She

could see it now- the black scorch-mark in his side, she had no idea how deep. She could see the long graze across her lower arm too, the black streak of scorched cloth, synthfibers, and human flesh that still smoked.

Miranda held Skywalker between her and Veila. She pressed the business tip of his lightsaber against the boy's own temple and said, "Don't try it. Don't try anything."

"You don't want to do this," Veila insisted, holding one hand out while the other still clutched her saber. "You want to put that saber down."

She certainly did. She wanted to get away from his whole mess as quickly as possible. She didn't want to hurt Skywalker either, or Veila, not really, despite their hounding her for the better part of two days, despite their pompous obsession with thwarting the very justice she'd been seeking for so long-

She shook her head as if to knock the foreign thoughts out. "Nice try, Jedi, but I'm not weak-minded, remember?"

"I can see that," Veila said. She kept her feet planted where they were. Miranda started backing toward the door, even though it was getting increasingly hard to keep dragging Skywalker with her.

"Where do you think you'll go?" Veila asked.

"As far as I can get on your speeder."

With her free hand she fished around in Skywalker's jacket until she found her datapad. She gave it a quick check, saw her precious data rod inside, then adjusted her grip. She held Skywalker up with the other arm, keeping the saber blade angled upward as if to stab him in the chin. With her other hand she tucked the datapad into her own vest, pressing tight against her chest. Her

hands reached out, found what she wanted right next to it.

"You can't win," Veila said.

Miranda found herself smiling. She wished she could pull her goggles on, but oh well. "I already have."

She threw down her last flash grenade at the same time as she threw down Skywalker. She squeezed her eyes shut and ran. The light blinded her, the sound deafened her, and the pain of both stabbed into her skull, but her hands found the door and she pushed. She scrambled down the hall, holding one end of the wall for purchase while the other held tight onto Skywalker's lightsaber. By the time she burst out the front door and pitched into the sand, her vision was coming back. She searched frantically in the dark until she spotted a truly miserable-looking XP-40 land-speeder, halfway stripped down to scrap.

Well, she thought, it would do, assuming the radiator didn't burst.

She raced out across the black desert and didn't look back.

"Sithspawn, sithspawn, sithspawn!" Tahiri swore again and again. She was on her knees, hands sweeping across the cold garage floor. She felt the fabric of Ben's clothes and felt around his body. Arms, legs, head, chest, all in tact at least. She felt around his chest until she found the burnt scar where he'd been slashed by his own lightsaber. It ran down his side, across his ribcage, likely severing bones and maybe organs too, depending on how deep the wound went.

Her vision was clearing. She could see the scar now, so long, so black. She could see Ben's face, pale and lax. She heard the sound of boots and looked up. Hey

eyes focused on the big form of the Klatooinan station manages, staring at the scene in shock.

“Get a medkit!” Tahiri shouted. “Bacta, bandages, anything!”

“Wha- what-” the station manager jawed.

“Medkit!” Tahiri shouted, throwing in a Force command with it. “Now!”

“Right! Medkit!” the station manager scurried off.

Tahiri put her hand on Ben's chest, trying to feel how deep the wound went. Not too deep, she didn't think, but she was never a healer. She wished to the Force Tekli or Cilghal were here, that she didn't have to rely on the cheap medical supplies of a backwater town on a backwater planet.

“Ta... Tahiri...” she heard a whisper, and saw Ben's lip's twitching. She reached up, cupped his head with both hands, and crouched low over his face.

“It's okay Ben,” she said. “You're gonna be okay.”

“Did she... did she get it?” He asked. His eyes flickered, tried to open, then shut tight.

“She got the datapad,” Tahiri said. “Took your saber too. I'm so sorry Ben...”

“My fault,” he muttered. “So stupid... But.... Did she *get* it?”

“I told you Ben, she took the datapad,” Tahiri told him again. Maybe she should be chasing Miranda Fardreamer across the desert right now, but she couldn't abandon Ben. She couldn't go back to Master Skywalker and tell him she'd left her son to die while she chased a mystery datarod.

“Jacket,” Ben muttered. “Check.... Switched it....”

Tahiri felt the torn side of his jacket, then the other. On the intact side she found one slim datarod, tucked away in his pocket.

“Switched it...” Ben's lips almost smiled. “Just in case...”

“Ben... Is this *it*? Is this Traygo's datarod?”

“Sleight... hand... GAG trick,” he coughed. Tahiri was relieved to see no blood. “Switched with... Dad's.... Wanted to.... give....”

Tahiri understood now. Ben had switched out Traygo's datarod and put the old one from the Skywalker Homestead in its place, just in case Miranda tried something, which she obviously did.

“Good job Ben,” she patted his face lightly. “You did good. You did real good.”

“Of... course.” His lips just managed a smile. Then they went flat. His head rolled to the side. Tahiri felt a spike of panic, but his breathing was still regular.

At that point the station managed returned, holding a white case of medical supplies. He crouched down next to Tahiri and said, “I called the town doc. But... What happened?”

Tahiri sighed. She didn't know where to begin.

Chapter 15

The phantom blue blur of hyperspace whipped past *Isolder's* cockpit, casting everything inside with an eerie glow. All five of them were crammed in this time: Zekk and Lowie in the pilot and copilot's seats, wounded but on their way to recovery, while the women stood behind them. All leaned in close toward the flickering holo of Grand Master Skywalker. Once again, they did not know where he was speaking from.

"I was afraid something like this would happen," He said sternly. "When you discovered Ship, you should have waited for backup to arrive. Going into a temple you knew to contain Sith and voxyn was extremely reckless."

"I'm sorry, Master Skywalker, but that was my decision," Jaina said. "It was going to be at least a day before backup arrived, and I thought Ship would be gone by then. We were lucky to catch the Sith when we did. They were on their way out when we found them."

"Jaina made the correct decision under the circumstances, Master Skywalker," Tenel Ka said. "Whatever the Sith had recovered from the Temple, they had already found it when we arrived. I saw Vestara toss a

sack of something to the other Sith as they were boarding Ship.”

“I understand you had to make a difficult choice,” Uncle Luke said, without taking back his earlier accusation. He gave a long sigh and said, “To be honest, I’m surprised. Two years ago I sent a survey team to check the ruins at Yavin 4 and found nothing. Clearly they should have looked harder.”

That took everyone by surprise. Lowie growled the question that was on everyone’s minds.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I’ve been trying to keep this very secret.” Uncle Luke’s holo looked over all five of them. Its gaze settled on Taryn Zel.

The young woman stiffened. “If this is Jedi-only business, I understand.”

“Thank you,” Luke nodded slightly.

Taryn slipped quietly out the door, leaving the four Jedi with a little more space. Uncle Luke looked over the group once more, then said, “Over the past two years, I’ve been sending Jedi across the galaxy to search out old Sith worlds, including Yavin 4.”

“Like when we searched Ziost and Korriban,” Jaina said. “You’re looking for what’s left of the Lost Tribe?”

Luke shook his head.

Tenel Ka stiffened. “If you are not looking for the Lost Tribe, Master Skywalker, what *are* you looking for?”

Luke’s holo-transmitted gaze seemed to stare into each of them. “This is a matter of utmost confidentiality. Even the agents I have sent haven’t been given the full story.”

Lowie gave a low groan.

Luke said, “Three years ago, when I fought the last incarnation of Abeloth in the Maw, I was severely

wounded, as you must remember. However, I was not the only one engaged in that fight. I killed Abeloth with the help of a mysterious Sith who did not seem to be associated with the Lost Tribe.”

“More Sith out there,” Jaina hissed. “It never ends, does it?”

“The Sith Lord I fought alongside was extremely powerful,” Luke said. “After the fight we were both too badly injured to face each other, and I had to let him limp away. But the things he said indicated he was not alone.”

“And so you've been sending teams to find him.” Zekk said. “It's a huge galaxy, Master Skywalker.”

“I'm well aware of that. Up until now it's been a useless search, even though some teams are still out hunting, Ben and Tahiri among them.”

“So that was why they didn't come to my wedding,” said Zekk. “The Sith spoil every party.”

“The Sith ruin everything, which is why they have to be stopped,” Luke said gravely.

“Master Skywalker,” Tenel Ka spoke up, “Did the existence of this Sith Lord influence your decision to withdraw the Jedi from Coruscant and the Alliance?”

“There are many reasons,” Luke said, “But that was a big one, yes. Daala was wrong about many things-”

Lowie gave a dismissive grunt.

“-But I remember something she told me that wasn't completely false. She accused the Jedi and Sith of dragging the rest of the Galaxy into their 'sectarian feuds,' as she called them.”

“That's poodoo,” Zekk said with a sneer. “The Sith are the ones who want to take over the whole galaxy and the Jedi are the only ones who can stop them. The

Sith want power, power over everything. That's what *being* Sith means."

"And you're very right," Luke said. "However, so was Daala, from a certain point of view, and as a wise man once said, many of our great truths depend on a certain point of view."

Lowbacca gave a skeptical growl.

"I believe I understand what Master Skywalker is saying," Tenel Ka said. "The Jedi have great power, and with that power comes the responsibility to protect innocents. Many millions died when the Lost Tribe attempts to take over Coruscant."

"And that happened *because* the Jedi were away!" Zekk protested.

"A large piece of the populace sees it the other way around," Jaina said grimly. "And if we were still trying to cling to the structures of the Alliance, we'd be so mucked up in politics that we wouldn't see these new Sith coming. Is that what you mean, Uncle Luke?"

"That's a very important part," Luke nodded. "We can focus on being Jedi now, and hunting down the Sith, on our own terms. Also, if the Sith do attempt to attack us, we're far away from the Core and can prevent many innocent lives from being caught in the crossfire."

Zekk crossed his arms over his chest. "Master Skywalker, may I ask a question?"

"Go ahead, Zekk."

"Master Skywalker, why didn't you tell us of this beforehand? If hunting these new Sith is supposed to be the Order's new goal, why haven't any of us heard about it?"

"Do you suspect a security leak inside the Temple?" Tenel Ka asked.

Luke shook his head. "No. I was simply being cautious. I also don't want to raise alarm. I trust every Jedi under my command, but if I told everyone about a resurgent Sith, eventually that news will leak out to the normal galaxy and cause chaos. So that's why I had to keep this secret from everyone, even family."

"I understand, Uncle Luke," Jaina said. "Really, I do."

"Thank you." Luke smiled weakly. He seemed very old. "You know, a very long time ago, I had a conversation with Mon Mothma. She asked me what I was hoping to create with my new Jedi Order, what place I wanted my Jedi to have in society."

"That's always been a tricky question, hasn't it?" Zekk smiled sadly. "I remember everybody arguing about that since the Yuuzhan Vong invasion."

"Before that, believe me," Luke said. "In the Old Republic, the Jedi served the Senate and the Chancellor, which was good as long as the Chancellor was a just man. But eventually the Chancellor became a Sith, and he turned the Jedi into instruments of their own destruction."

"Mon Mothma told me that she wanted a Jedi on every streetcorner. She wanted Jedi policemen and doctors and pilots, Jedi fully integrated in every facet of society. I think she would be ashamed at what the Jedi order has turned to now, a planetful of warrior-monks who have separated themselves from the galaxy even more than the galaxy has rejected them."

It was a damning self-assessment, and neither Jaina nor the others had anything to say.

Luke said, "I think we might have come the closest to Mon Mothma's dream after the Yuuzhan Vong War, when I let Jedi go free to live the lives they wanted."

“That changed with the coming of the Dark Nest,” said Tenel Ka softly.

Luke nodded. “I made everyone chose between their normal lives and the Order. It was a hard choice, necessary to meet a time of crisis. I don't regret it- I think it had to be done then- but I can see now that I made a Jedi Order too dependent on myself. After I was made outcast we saw what disasters happened. Jedi Master fought Jedi Master. Good Jedi died, and millions of innocents perished.”

Luke paused. The cockpit was silent except for the faint crackle of static from the holo-emitter.

Finally, Luke said, “This will be our last crisis. After we extinguish the Sith, there will be major changes to the way the Jedi Order is run.”

Lowie growled a question.

A faint smile came to Master Skywalker's lips. “You'll just have to wait and find out.”

The grim silence still hung in the air. Jaina asked, “Uncle Luke, what about the voxyn? We still have no idea how the Sith got their hands on a Yuuzhan Vong bio-engineered monster. If there *are* more Sith out there, and they have more voxyn themselves...”

“I am looking into leads on that as well,” Luke said, without further elaboration. “Master Solo, I'm going to request that you head to Ossus as soon as possible.”

Jaina stiffened. “Of course, Master Skywalker.”

“Good,” Luke said, and looked at the others. “The rest of you don't need to hurry. Tenel Ka, you should return to your daughter and your kingdom. I'm sure you have a lot of work to do keeping both of them in line.”

Tenel Ka smiled faintly “As always, Grand Master Skywalker is wise.”

“Lowie, you should take your time to heal on Hapes as well. Zekk, do the same, and enjoy your honeymoon while you're at it.”

The lanky man forced a smile. “Will do, Master Skywalker.”

“Very good.” Luke said. “Good luck, and may the Force be with all of you.”

And then his image winked out.

Lowie gave a long, wheezing sigh and crossed hairy arms over his chest. Zekk settled back in his chair, craned his neck up, and looked at the two women. “Well, I'm ready to relax, aren't you?”

Neither said anything. The light of hyperspace, ghostly and surreal, continued to pass them by.

Jaina had little turn-around time before leaving Hapes. She stayed long enough to see Zekk and Lowie come out of the bacta tanks, which healed a lot of their minor scrapes and scratches, but the doctors, mildly befuddled by their big furry patient, insisted on keeping Lowie overnight for observation. Meanwhile, they gave Zekk a sleek metal crutch to hobble around on while his bones mended.

“I feel like an old man,” he grouched as Taryn helped him limp out of the hospital to the hovercar where Jaina, Tenel Ka, Allana, and Trista were waiting.

“Don't worry dear, you're still as handsome as ever.” Taryn chided her husband as they slid into the back seat next to the Queen Mother and Princess.

Trista brought the engines back on line, and soon the vehicle was soaring upward through Hapes' pearly skies, hopping over its islands and making its way for the Queen's personal landing pad, where a Miy'til fighter was waiting.

"The sky looks really pretty," Allana observed, crawling onto her mother's lap to watch the late-afternoon light turn the clouds pastel shades of violet and rose-white.

"Indeed," Tenel Ka smiled calmly, and put a hand on her daughter's shoulder. Jaina, craning her neck to watch them, had to smile herself. After years of solitude and tragedy, Tenel Ka finally had something permanent in her life. Even with the threat of renewed tragedy, she was smiling more than ever.

It made Jaina feel glad, but she also felt a strange pang of envy. She turned away and settled in her seat, unsure of the cause. Did she envy Tenel Ka for her daughter? Not really; the idea of having children of her own still frightened her. For having Zekk, Taryn, and Trista as loyal friends and companions? A little. But that was silly, wasn't it? She had Jag after all, and two parents she could only hope to emulate, and an entire order of Jedi Knights who looked to her for leadership (not that that wasn't as much a burden as it was a privilege). Still, looking at Tenel Ka and Allana made her feel strangely empty.

There was little conversation on the way to the landing pad. When the hovercar settled, Jaina got out onto the platform, as did Tenel Ka and Allana. Zekk stayed awkwardly seated by the door, leaning halfway out to give Jaina's hand a warm shake.

"If Master Skywalker needs us for anything, let us know," he said, doing his best to smile, though Jaina could see the worry in his eyes.

"Don't worry, I will." She shook back. Taryn might have been staring daggers over his shoulder, but it was a little hard to tell, and frankly she didn't even care.

Jaina walked with Tenel Ka and Allana toward the Miy'til. Allana was saying, "Do you think I'll get to see you again soon?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Jaina crouched down to Allana's level.

"Good," the girl smiled. "And Grandma and Grandpa too."

"I'll tell 'Grandma' and 'Grandpa' you said that," Jaina said, and held out a hand. The girl put her little hand in Jaina's and gave it a shake far firmer than you'd expect from a nine-year-old girl.

"Go on back to the car, dear," Tenel Ka put a hand on Allana's head.

The girl looked up at her mother and pouted. "Is this going to be Jedi talk or something?"

"No, a different kind," Tenel Ka said. "You will understand when you're older."

"Oh," Allana rolled her eyes. "*That* kind of talk." She looked to Jaina. "Tell Jag I said hello."

Jaina had to stifle a laugh as the girl walked back to the car and hopped in next to Zekk.

"Is it really *that* kind of a talk?" she looked at Tenel Ka.

The red-haired woman shook her head. "Not precisely. Nor Jedi talk either."

"Then what kind?" Jaina asked as she retrieved the flight helmet sitting on the rim of the Miy'til's cockpit.

"Queenly talk, I suppose," Tenel Ka said.

"Ah," Jaina sighed, looking over the helmet and adjusting its straps. "Politics, then?"

"It is my life now," Tenel Ka said.

"Yeah, I know." Jaina looked at her feet. "Is this about what Uncle Luke was saying?"

"He seems much older lately," Tenel Ka said.

"He's been through a lot. Losing Mara, being an outcast, that fight with Abeloth, and in the Monolith..." There was Jacen too, but neither of them was going to say it.

Tenel Ka nodded. "He looks ready to retire."

"Well, knowing Uncle Luke, he'll outlast us all."

"Perhaps." Tenel Ka's gray eyes avoided Jaina's. "Tell me something, Jaina. On Yavin, when we fought Vestara, you took off her arm."

"Yes," Jaina stiffened. "She wasn't going to surrender. I had to incapacitate her."

"For capture?" Tenel Ka asked. "Or were you ready to kill her?"

"She's a very dangerous enemy who's already gotten Jedi Knights killed. I was going to do what I had to." Jaina's jaw clenched. "We were fighting to stay alive, Tenel Ka. I couldn't afford to be *merciful*."

"The girl was close to Ben at one time, wasn't she?"

"And he's not going to face her again, period. He's still young. He's not in the emotional state to handle it."

"It has been my observation that Ben Skywalker can handle just about anything. He was trained by an errant Sith Lord when he was just fourteen years old, but he managed to come clear into the light."

A Sith lord. Never his name. Never the man they'd both loved, the man they'd betrayed, the man Jaina had been forced to murder. Forced to murder, what a thought that was.

"She was dangerous, she always had been. She almost got Allana killed once." Jaina said. "I was going to do whatever I had to."

"I understand that. You always do." There was no rebuke in her voice. Jaina heard one anyway. "Your

uncle has been carrying the burdens of the whole Order for far too long. You don't have to follow in his footsteps."

"What does this have to do with Hapes?" Jaina crossed her arms over her chest.

"As your uncle said, he once made me chose between being a queen and being a Jedi. I had to choose to become a queen."

"I know. I remember. But you're still a Jedi."

"I am, but still, I am also a queen." She glanced over her shoulder at the hovercar. "I have worlds to protect, as well as people I care about. I am sorry, but if the Jedi call for aid, I don't think I can come again."

"Not even against Sith?"

Tenel Ka shook her head. "Hapes has never been friendly to Jedi. When I assumed my position as Queen, most didn't think I'd last a month. But I am still here after fifteen years. That's almost half my life, Jaina, and do you know why?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I rule for the benefit of my people, which sometimes means appeasing the nobles who represent them in the palace." she said. "Hosting the Jedi children at Shedu Maad is a risky enough move, and dangerous if it becomes public knowledge. To mobilize the Hapan fleet on what the public will see as Jedi business would be too much. It was permissible before, when Jedi and Alliance business aligned, but that situation is gone."

"Tenel Ka, you don't have to apologize to me."

"Apologize, friend Jaina?" Tenel Ka forced a smile, but her eyes remained gray and hard. "I am Queen Mother of Hapes. I never apologize, only explain."

"Ah, sorry, I forgot."

"No you didn't." Her eyes softened a little.

Jaina exhaled sharply. "Well... Think I can borrow Zekk if we need him?"

"That is up to Zekk."

"Taryn, you mean?"

"I mean Taryn." Her smile was genuine this time.

"If that's the case, he'll never leave Hapes again," Jaina smiled back.

"Nonsense," Tenel Ka said, "I'm sure she'll want a second honeymoon. This one Jedi-free."

"We put them through hell, don't we?" Jaina thought of Jag and her father.

"It can only be the will of the Force."

"A joke, Tenel Ka?" Jaina cocked an eyebrow.

"Perhaps," she shrugged. "You should get going, friend Jaina."

Tenel Ka reached out and pulled Jaina into a firm hug. Jaina squeezed her friend back, and when she pulled away she thought she saw a few gleaming specks in her friend's eye. But she said nothing, and wave goodbye as she climbed into the Miy'til's cockpit and slipped on the helmet. By that time Allana and Tenel Ka were standing by the side of the hovercar, watching expectantly as Jaina fired up the engines. Two minutes later she lifted off into the rose-and-violet sky. Her friends watched until she was gone.

Chapter 16

The big break came with an intercepted transmission.

Faster-than-light communication through space was normally an ordered thing, with every ship's comm systems automatically tracking the closest HoloNet transceiver station, which would return relay the message to the next transceiver, until you were talking in real time with someone on the far side of the civilized galaxy.

The Unknown Regions, of course, weren't civilized.

Communication was easy for Wraith Squadron and *Wessex*, because every recon X-wing flight was automatically patched into the strike cruiser's communications computer. *Wessex* in turn was programmed to transmit to the HoloNet station at Esfandia. However, if, say, one had an entire fleet floating around the Unknown Regions, and one part of that fleet got separated from another, they'd have no choice but send out out broad-beam messages that flashed out through a sector or maybe in every direction at once, because if you don't know which way to shoot your message you had to send it every place at once and hope it stuck. They were notoriously insecure, and

worse, they were like a big beacon declaring your location for anybody within fifteen parsecs. You only used those messages in an emergency.

So when *Wessex* picked up an encrypted broad-beam message, they knew someone was close, and someone was probably in trouble.

Myri Antilles was scheduled to get in her X-wing and fly a recon mission with Jesmin Tainer at 0600 hours, *Wessex* onboard time. It was to be the first flight of that standardized day. So she was woken quite abruptly when, at 0440 hours, the comm system right above her bunk started screaming at her:

“Attention Myri Antilles! Attention Myri Antilles! Report to the flight deck immediately! Report to the flight deck immediately!”

She was down to the flight deck by 0445, groggy and confused and zipping up her flight suit as she shambled toward her X-wing. Imperial flight crews were making last checks on her ship – she was never going to like that, or get used to it- and she almost-literally ran into Jesmin, who was awkwardly trying to shove her helmet over the ponytail on her head.

“Any idea what the kark is going on?” Myri spat as she deftly avoided Jesmin.

The other woman shook her head. “No idea! I just heard the alarm-”

“We're not under attack, are we?” She looked around. All the other X-wings were sitting untouched, save hers and Jesmin's.

“We're not late right?” Jesmin taped her wrist-chrono.

“Not unless mine's off too,” Myri scowled, and jabbed a finger at Jesmin's ponytail. The woman took a moment to realize what Myri was pointing at, then

nodded, undid it, and shoved her helmet onto her head of blond hair.

"Is this a prank or something?" Jesmin said as they resumed walking across the flight deck. "My parents said the Wraiths used to do pranks all the time."

"What, you think the Imps got a sense of humor? Not kriffing likely."

As if on cue, a figure stepped out from between their two X-wings. It was small, female, bright red, and tucked into a black Imperial uniform. Myri was still trying to figure out which was more bizarre: that a Twi'lek woman had become a commanding officer for a notoriously racist and sexist government, or that one would want to in the first place.

Red walked up to the two pilots and looked their frumpled tired forms up and down with a perfectly condescending Imperial demeanor.

"We're ready to fly," Myri said defensively.

"I'm sure you are." Red nodded.

"Do you mind telling us that's going on here?" Jesmin asked, then added, "Sir?"

"Of course." Red nodded again. "We've just intercepted a broad-beam transmission. Encrypted, of course. We're working on translation- but we've pinpointed the source of the broadcast."

"You think it was our phantom fleet?" Myri asked.

"Well, it certainly wasn't the Vong. It's up to you to investigate."

"You can count on us," Jesmin said, and snapped an impressively crisp salute. Myri did her best to copy it.

Red nodded, again. "To your ships. We'll give you the coordinates once you're in space."

After that they scattered, Myri and Jesmin to their ships, while Red hurried off the flight deck. Myri

climbed up the ladder and into her X-wing. She looked around for her helmet, sure she'd left it somewhere in the cockpit. She was surprised when an Imperial crewman popped up over the rim of the ladder, holding up her flight helmet.

"Here you are, miss."

Myri blinked. "Um, thank you."

"Good flying, miss," said the Imp, and clambered down the ladder.

Myri sighed as she put on the helmet. If only her father could see her now.

They gathered in Fy'ylor's private salon, located just aft of the bridge. *Wessex* was a far smaller craft than an *Imperial*-class star destroyer, but its command deck was laid out similarly, including the crew pits and walkways up front and the captain's personal station to the back. Fy'ylor stood in front of her communications station, Jag to one side, SaBinring to the other. The Gamorrean must have been two, maybe even three size that of the Twi'lek woman, but she looked unperturbed as SaBinring lurched closer, listening to the communication from the recon team and watching their recovered data scan by on holo-projector.

The X-wings were currently hanging close to the shadow of a moon, and entering sensor range of a cluster of capital ships they'd detected.

"Getting data now," Antilles reported through their tight-beam, encrypted communications relay.

"Data received," Fy'ylor confirmed, pressing down on her station's broadcast switch. "Getting telemetry now."

The holo-projector began scrolling through data on gravitational pull and stellar bodies. Then sensors

picked up the ships, five of them, sitting in low orbit over a dead planet sitting on the outer rim of a nameless star system.

"No identification broadcast, but I think we can estimate ship data," Antilles said.

"Copy, data incoming," Fy'lyor confirmed. The data began to scroll in front of them:

CONFIRMED Mon Calamari Shipyards MC80a Cruiser

CONFIRMED Mon Calamari Shipyards MC80 Cruiser

CONFIRMED Republic Engineering Majestic-class Cruiser

UNDETERMINED Rendilli StarDrive Victory I-Class or Victory II-Class

CONFIRMED Nebulon-B-class escort frigate

"Two Mon Calamari cruisers," SaBinring said. "And ships from the New Class program."

"Confirmed Alliance, then," Fy'lyor looked at the Gamorrean.

"We knew *nothing* about this," SaBinring insisted.

"I believe *you* didn't," Fy'lyor glanced at Jagged, then looked away, but he got the message. She was bragging, because she thought her suspicions were right.

"Hold on, we don't *know* they're Alliance," Jag said.

"You're telling me they could just *lose* a couple Mon Cal Cruisers and not notice?"

"They were starting to investigate possible missing ships when we left Coruscant," SaBinring insisted. "We have no idea what they've found in the meantime."

"So you lost a whole task force by accident?" Fy'lyor scowled. "The Empire would never be that sloppy."

"You *did*," the Gamorrean growled. "It was called the Black Sword Fleet, and a bunch of mad Yevetha used it to kill millions of people."

"I'm picking up comm traffic," came the voice of Jesmin Tainer over the com system. It was a one-way broadcast, so the recon pilots, thankfully, hadn't heard the argument.

"What kind of comm traffic?" Jag thumbed the comlink on, thankful for a distraction.

"Not sure yet," Antilles said. "Looks like tight-beam communications between all ships. Short bursts. Can't intercept."

"Could be doing status checks before a jump to hyperspace," Jag looked to the others.

"Agreed," Fy'lyor said, and pressed the broadcast switch. "Try to get tracking information on those ships, and fast. Don't let them see you, but see if you can plot possible destinations of they jump to hyperspace based on current trajectory."

"Already on it," Antilles sounded slightly annoyed.

"I'm picking up energy spikes," Tainer spoke up. "Those MC80s are warming up their- Damn! They just jumped to hyperspace."

"Can we track them?" Fy'lyor scowled.

"Just a sec..." Antilles said. Trajectory data appeared on the holofeed. "Getting projections. 70% odds that jump puts them on heading for the... XB-790c star system."

"Follow them," Fy'lyor said. She glanced at Jag, then at SaBinring, as if asking for their objections. She got none.

"Copy that," Antilles said. "Laying in a course now. We'll try and pop out on the edge of the system so they won't see us leaving hyperspace."

“A good decision, Skate.” SaBinring spoke up. “Have weapons and targeting systems warmed up just in case.”

“Copy that, Piggy. Getting ready to jump.”

When Fy'lyor took her hand off the broadcast button, Jag asked, “Do we want to go to yellow alert?”

“Why?” The Twi'lek woman looked at him.

“In case my pilots run into trouble,” SaBinring said.

Fy'lyor cocked an eyebrow. “If your pilots run into trouble they are on their own. I'm not risking the safety of this vessel for two pilots.”

SaBinring's lips curled around his tusks. “You don't have to risk *your* pilots, but *I* command mine and they will follow *my* orders over yours.”

“Jump plotted,” Antilles interrupted. “Ready to go in five... four... three... two... one. Mark.”

The starlines blurred to light, and light dissolved back to stars in the space of three seconds. Myri barely had time to register shock before last blasts flashed just meters outside her cockpit. She fought back a shout of surprise and snapped her fighter into a hard port roll, barely in time to avoid a pair of molten projectiles that whipped past.

“Sithspit!” Jesmin swore over the comlink. “*Wessex*, we and under fire! Repeat, we are under fire!”

“Locking S-foils in attack position!” Myri reported. Get ready to fight, then get your bearings. “Weapons armed and ready!”

“Skate, Ranger, relay location!” the voice of Jagged Fel crackled over her helmet speakers.

“Came out hyperspace short,” Myri said. “Try locking on our beacon.”

“Skate, was it a drag ship?” Voort asked.

Myri looked at her scanners and out her viewport, trying to make sense of the chaos around her. She saw fighting whipping past in every direction- X-wings, B-wings, E-wings, A-9 interceptors, even a few bulky old K-wing bombers. And dancing between them, chunks of space-rock shooting out volcano-blasts of energy. It took Myri a second to realize what they were, even though she'd fought them in simulators a dozen times.

"We've got Vong ships out here!" Jesmin reported. "I'm picking up capital ships, including an interdicator analog..."

"What about the Mon Cal ships?" Red's voice crackled over her headset.

"I'm, picking up- kriff!" Myri swore, and jerked hard starboard to get away from a coralskipper. "Ranger, I've got one on me!"

"Coming after you, hold on!" Jesmin said. Myri pulled hard port now, but the skipper hung on her tight. She looked at her status screen: a swarm of gold-unidentified fighters- and just one speck of Jesmin's green. She looked out her cockpit, and began the tangle of dogfights she saw the sleek silver forms of a trio of Bothan Assault Cruisers. The second she recognized them her fighter shook under the impact of enemy fire, and she pulled her fighter into a steep upward corkscrew.

"Any time, Jezzie!" she shouted.

"Tracking, hold on!" Jesmin said.

A pair of torpedoes slammed into the nose of the coralskipper just as it turned to pursue Myri, shearing off its cockpit. The remains of the vessel flipped and tumbled, dead in space.

"Thanks!" Myri breathed.

"That wasn't me!" Jesmin said.

As Myri leveled out her craft she saw an E-wing whip by. Her anonymous savior reformed into a wing with two more E-wings, then dove back into the fray.

"Skate, Ranger," Red seemed to shout over the com. "Get us our data and get out of there. Do not engage, repeat, do not engage."

"Trying our best, *Wessex*," Myri hissed. "Little thick out here."

"Hold on, I'm bringing my sensors on line," Jesmin reported. "Syncing with *Wessex*..."

Then she screamed. Myri looked starboard to see a stray torpedo slam into Jesmin's X-wing, shearing off both port S-foils and sending the craft spinning out of control.

"Ranger, eject!" Myri shouted. "Eject! Eject!"

Jesmin's X-wing blossomed into a flower of molten light. Myri dove right for the wreckage, scouring the still-fiery debris field for any signs of life.

"I've got her!" she shouted. "I've got her eject beacon! Ranger, do you copy? Jezzie, do you?"

And then something slammed into Myri's X-wing. She was thrown into a swift spin, and as the stars whipped by outside she reached for her own ejection lever. Her hand found the level just as an energy blast slammed into the nose of her X-wing. She pulled a hard right before her proton torpedo magazine detonated. She trailed fire and light behind as she shot out into a space blazing with death.

"Signal's gone!" SaBinring said, though all three could see the holo-feed wink out. The Gamorrean moved for the door more quickly than Jag would have thought possible.

"Where are you going?" Fy'lyor snapped.

The Gamorrean spun around equally fast to stare at her. "I am going to recover my pilots."

"We don't even know if they ejected. The signal beacons don't carry this far."

"Then there's only one way to find out." A comlink appearing in SaBinring's big green hands. He flicked it on and said, "All Wraiths, report to the flight deck. Repeat, all Wraiths, report to the flight deck!"

"You expect to recover them with your X-wings?" Fy'lyor said.

"I'm not going to go to their parents- *my friends*- and tell them I let their daughters die because some... some Twi'lek *traitor* ordered me to!"

"Provide them a shuttle," Jag snapped.

Both of them looked at him as if remembering he was in the room. The Twi'lek woman said, "With all due respect, *Mister Fel*, you are a civilian advisor with no actual authority."

"Send a shuttle," Jag's tone mustered all the authority he'd given up three years ago. "Even if we can't recover the pilots, we need to monitor that battle. We can't let this opportunity pass."

Fy'lyor scowled, but nodded. She plucked out her comlink, dialed the flight deck, and said, "Prepare a shuttle for recovery mission. X-wings will escort. I'll send you the flight plan."

After the deck commander gave affirmative, she pocketed the comlink and stared stonily across the room at SaBinring. She said, "I was born in the Empire, *Mister SaBinring*. My parents were slaves, but I was freed under Pellaeon's reforms. The Empire did horrible things to non-humans, but that was in the past. *Some* of us can look to the future."

The Gamorrean gave no grunt of acknowledgement, no nod of thanks. He just turned and walked out of the room.

Only when the door hissed shut did Fy'lyor seem to deflate. She sighed and her stiff military pose sagged. As she went over to the transmissions console and began punching in the coordinates for flight control, Jag said, "You're letting your distrust of them get in the way of your duty, Lieutenant Colonel."

Fy'lyor scowled at them. "There are Mon Cal and Bothan ships out there right now, fighting the Yuuzhan Vong. Either they are a top-secret fleet, sent by Alliance government without informing us, or they are the biggest rogue operation we've seen since the Black Fleet Crisis. Either way, Alliance personnel are involved."

"That's no reason to let two pilots die."

"Your cousin is irrelevant."

"You're right, this isn't about my cousin. Hells, I barely know her. This is about the good of the galaxy." Jag said. "Lofty words, I know, but it's true. If it turns out the Vong are on the warpath again, full-scale, that rogue fleet is the galaxy's best chance of heading them off. We might need them, *and* the Alliance. Imperial chauvinism isn't going to help anyone right now."

Fy'lyor regarded him carefully. "Is that where your loyalties are, Jagged Fel? Not the Empire, not the Alliance, not the Chiss or the Jedi, but the galaxy as a whole?"

He nodded. It was a question he'd asked himself many times, and it was the best one he could come up with.

"Very well," she said. "I'm going to the bridge, Mister Fel. Feel free to follow."

“I'd be glad to,” Jag said, “So long as I don't get in the way.”

“As long as you don't touch anything, I'm sure we'll be fine,” she said, almost with a smile.

Chapter 17

The recovery team leaped right into a maelstrom. As soon as they hit the interdiction field, Scut found laser-blasts and energy-bursts crisscrossing dead in front of him. Starfighters and coralskippers of every variety danced a frenzied, lethal dance. Beyond, two sleek Bothan assault cruisers exchanged broadsides with a Yuuzhan Vong frigate, while a *Nebulon-B* frigate, looking terribly fragile with its thin spine connecting the forward body with the aft engines, was fighting a wide-bodied vessel the likes of which Scut had never seen, not in all the years he'd studied his people's military capabilities.

"Look alive, Silly Squadron!" Voort barked over his headset. Lead and Huhunna were aboard the boxy *Gamma*-class assault shuttle the Imperials had so kindly loaned them for the rescue operation, while eight X-wings flew escort.

"Scan for eject beacons," Sharr Latt said. "You all have the frequencies."

Scut clicked his affirmative, then wrestled his craft hard to port to avoid a flight of E-wings. Even knowing the frequency on which Myri and Jesmin were broad-

casting their distress signals, it would be nigh-impossible to find them in the middle of the battle, where so many comm-signals and energy-bursts played havoc with their sensors.

“Shifter and Smiles, on me,” Scut said to Turman Durra and Trey Courser. “We form trios, cover at all times.”

The two pilots signaled their affirmatives, and the three X-wings formed up with Scut in fore, Turman rear-port, and Courser rear-starboard. It was a small step to reduce the chaos and danger of this battlezone, but it was the best they could do. Scut counted them lucky, at least, that the Republic fighters- or whatever they were- were automatically assuming them friendly. That left only the Vong to deal with.

“Sithspawn, look at that,” Trey said.

“Cut the chatter, Smiles,” Scut snapped.

“Look port, forty degrees.”

Scut followed the other pilot's directions. Sitting there to the side of the battlezone, protected by two feisty little Corellian gunships and another Bothan cruiser, was a sleek *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer. One-third smaller than the original Imperial model but just as potent, the *Nebula*-class featured a curved bow that swelled downward, while the super-structure on the top half of the ship, including its command tower, was kept low to avoid enemy fire. It was one of the best capital ships produced by the Alliance, and somehow it was here in the Unknown Regions, battling the Yuuzhan Vong.

“Check above,” said Turman. “We've got incoming.”

Scut looked up to see a flight of coralskippers heading for them, guns blazing. Behind it, barely visibly against the black stars, was some kind of Vong

vessel, maybe the size of one of those Corellian gunships guarding the *Nebula*-class. Whatever it was, Scut and his wingmen dived before he could get a good look at it. He glanced at his scanners, but they were showing such a mess of Vong and Alliance ships he couldn't tell the class of any of them.

"Give them space," He told his wingmen. "We're getting our girls and getting out. This isn't our fight."

"Copy that, Scut," Turman said

"We've got a signal!" Voort's voice announced. "We're moving in on Ranger's eject beacon. Scut, bring your flight around to cover us."

"On our wayt, boss," Scut said.

It took him a moment to locate the assault shuttle in all the chaos, but when he did he aimed straight for it, Trey and Turman on his tail. He couldn't see Jesmin floating in space, but apparently Voort could, as his shuttle began to slow. Scut slowed too, then veered to the right and began to fly circles around the assault shuttle, firing at the occasional coralskipper to keep it from preying on the recovery team.

As he wheeled about, a flight of six big K-wing bombers whipped past, heading for the Yuuzhan Vong gunship analog. K-wings were good attack vessels, and probably packed enough punch to break though that gunships' defenses, but they were easy targets for coralskippers, and Scut didn't see any X-wings or E-wings running interference for them.

"Team, this is Lead," Voort said. "Ranger is secure. Repeat, Ranger is secure. Scut, break off."

As Trey whooped over the comlink, Scut said, "Copy lead." He almost asked permission to fly defense for the K-wings, but held his tongue. He was the one who'd just told his wingmen not to get involved. He,

Trey, and Turman pulled up, away from the shuttle as it veered toward the edge of the battle zone. He craned his neck to see the gunship, and spotted it just as one of the K-wings burst under its defensive fire. He saw four engine-trails left; another must have already gone down. He saw more engine-trails flare, this time heavy two torpedoes each detaching from their under-wing hardpoints. The torpedoes arced toward the gunship. Two exploded before reaching targets. Three more were swallowed suddenly by the gunship's dovin basal. The other three impacted on the gunship's forward hell. Yorik coral shat-tered and internal atmosphere ignited. Fire burst out into space. The K-wings, victorious, executing a steep climb-

-right into a flight of coralskippers. Two K-wings collided and vanished into flames. Another smashed into a coralskipper, destroying both. The last one clipped a skipper on the wing, sending both wheeling in opposite directions. The skipper exploded first, then the K-wing. Scut checking his sensors for eject signals, but there was no way to tell.

"No beacon," Turman said over the headset. "I still can't find her."

It took Scut a second to realize he was talking about Myri.

Scut watched the Yuuzhan Vong gunship smolder in space. He had no reply to give.

To Myri it looked like a dream. The Yuuzhan Vong gunship seemed to smolder in space, while oxygen and flame, corpses and chunks of debris, shot out into space. K-wing bombers and coralskippers collided, flared, turned into chunks of back debris. When the fire died out everything went black. She felt sleepy and

light. She was losing oxygen fast, and knew it. The manual thrusters on her ejection seat were already out. Stars drifted past slowly as she spun in space.

Then light came back. She kept spinning, back to face the battle. From the edge of it, when the coralskippers and X-wings weren't whipping past, it was beautiful. Two Bothan assault cruisers poured fire onto a Yuuzhan Vong vessel, squeezing it from either side until it popped. The escort frigate snapped in two, venting flame from either end of its broken spine. Another Yuuzhan Vong cruise was pulling close to a Mon Cal cruiser and exchanging broadsides. Or maybe it was the Mon Cal engaging the Vong ship. Her vision was blurry, and they were far away. She never realized how similar they looked.

She spun back around, facing darkness.

She was sleepy, so sleepy. She could sleep forever here, floating in black space. It would be so easy, so easy. She closed her eyes. They felt too heavy to open.

Light flared. She opened her eyes to see a B-wing explode. She kept spinning, back to face the battle. The Mon Cal and Vong cruiser were still going at it. She still couldn't tell which was which. She couldn't see the escort frigate any more. Maybe they'd torn up the pieces. As she watched an old *Victory*-class star destroyer engage another gunship analog, she wondered what her parents would think. They'd been lucky, not to lose her or Syal so far, but then, her parents had gone through more danger than any sane person would think possible, and they'd come out all right. Oh, they'd lost people they'd loved. Mom's first husband. All those dead Wraiths and Rogues she'd heard about and never known: The other Jesmin. Ibtisam, Ton Phannan, Lujayne Forge. Tal'dira. Asyr

Sei'lar. Piggy's friend, Runt. Syal's fiancée, Tiom. Oh, Syal had lost so much already. Anyone could see it in her eyes. She looked so old. She shouldn't have to lose a sister too.

Myri wished she could apologize to Syal, but there was nothing she could do. She spun away from the battle again. Just empty space now, and the pinpoint lights of a billion nameless stars.

Darkness and cold. She closed her eyes.

She slept.

The remains of the escort frigate, smoldering, was constantly gnawed by Yuuzhan Vong fire. The *Majestic*-class cruiser had pulled up close to grab its escape pods. The two Bothan assault cruisers had raked the pinned-down cruiser analog between them with a constant barrage of turbolaser blasts, until that vessel was left a dead hulk drifting in space. The area between was a flurry of darting fighters and energy blasts. The Mon Cal cruisers seemed to be vectoring in on the same Yuuzhan Vong vessel, one of unusual design, perhaps the source of the interdiction field. The *Victory*-class star destroyer was in trouble, with a Vong cruiser on either side. And between the fighting giants, starfighters and coralskippers buzzed like angry gnats, lacing the vacuum with energy-bursts.

"There's no beacon!" Sharr Latt's voice crackled over Scut's headset. Like the rest of his squadron, he kept his fighter flitting about on the edge of the battle zone, not daring to engage the battle, no matter how much he wanted to.

"Copy that, Smarty," Voort's voice sounded exasperated, even on the comlink. Scut felt his own despair at being unable to rescue Myri, but knew it

would be even worse for Voort, who'd known her parents for almost thirty years.

"Should we pull out?" Sharr asked. His tone pleaded 'yes.'

"Negative," said Voort. "We give it one more go. Use visual if you have to."

"There's so much debris floating around," Turman said, "Even if she ejected there's almost no way--"

"Shut it, Shifter," Voort growled. "We do one more pass, then we head back home. Clear?"

"Copy, lead." said Scut. "Do we leave anybody behind to watch the fight?"

"I'll take two volunteers," Voort said.

A part of Scut wanting to leap to the opportunity, but at the same time he knew how excruciating it would be to sit here and watch the fight without being able to participate. He patched in a private link to Voort's shuttle and said, "Lead, do you copy?"

"I copy, Scut." Voort sounded terse. "What is it?"

Scut opened his mouth to speak, but the words caught in his throat. He shut his jaw, opened it again to speak.

Then Sharr shouted, "Incoming! Incoming! I read four ships, just out of hyperspace!"

Scut snapped his jaw shut again and stared at his scanners. Sharr was right: four medium-cruiser-sized vessels had just dropped out of hyperspace on the far edge of the battlefield, closest to the dead frigate. His sensors couldn't pick up their class, and he could barely make them out with his naked eye: sleek, steel-gray vessels looking roughly like small star destroyers, but with wider, flatter bodies and elegantly curved hulls.

"What are they?" Trey said. "I can't get a reading. I don't recog--"

"Can it!" Voort said. "Check sensors. The Vong just dropped their interdiction field."

"I see it," Scut said. "Looks like some of those ships are making a break for it."

Indeed they were. The Yuuzhan Vong ships formerly engaged with the *Victory*-class were pulling away hard. Even as Scut watched they winked out of realspace. "They're bugging out!" He said.

"Wraiths, this is *Wessex*," The cold voice of Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor scratched on his headset. "Can you trace their destinations?"

"Negative," Voort said. "We could never figure out how to track Vong into hyperspace."

"Look," Turman said, "That *Nebula*-class is bugging out too. And the gunships."

"Even the *Majestic*-class," said Sharr. "Everybody's leaving the party."

"Try to track the Alliance ships," Fy'lyor said. "Give us one sensor lock on the newcomers, then come home."

"Copy," Voort said. "Everybody head home now except for Scut, Smiles, and Shifter. We stay for one more minute, then go."

"Copy, lead," Sharr said. "Let's go home, boys and girls."

A half-dozen X-wings disappeared into hyperspace. The other starfighters- Yuuzhan Vong and Alliance both- were either escaping into hyperspace or making emergency landings on their capital ships. Scut watched with astonishment at how quickly the battlefield cleared. Whatever those four cruisers were, they had clearly scared the daylights out of both sides.

Sixty seconds later, the last capital ships were clearing the area, leaving behind a sea of wreckage

drifting around two dead capital ships. It seemed an equal mix of Alliance and Yuuzhan Vong.

"We could learn a lot from this," Scut said, "Especially if there are survivors."

"We're not hanging around," Voort said sternly. "It's time to go home."

"Lead," Trey spoke up, "I still got no signal from Skate."

There was a pause. The open com-line buzzed faintly in Scut's ear. Then Voort said, "Set coordinates for *Wessex*. Let's get out of here."

Scut clicked his affirmative. He closed his S-foils and warmed his hyperdrive. They all jumped at once- one shuttle and three X-wings, leaving the battle behind.

The bridge of *Wessex* was abuzz with activity. Jagged Fel had spent more than his share of time on ship's bridges during battle, but this time (as Fy'lyor had reminded him once or twice) he was merely an observer, a civilian. And from experience he knew there was no-thing a ship's crew hated more than a civilian wandering around during a battle.

Wessex wasn't directly engaged in the battle, but the ship was on yellow alert and the bridge staff at full capacity. He was impressed by the way Fy'lyor's crew, so many of them older human males, responded to the young Twi'lek woman's commands. Hers was a personality that brooked no dissent, clearly a style she had learned from the Empire's more strict past. He noticed a few other aliens in the crew pit as well; one Devaronian female, another a Muun, plus two Frozians. As he watched them work, relaying battle reports back and forth across the bridge with well-oiled efficiency, he was struck with a strange sense of accomplishment.

During his short, rocky term as leader of the Empire, this was exactly the sort of scene he'd wanted to create. Stuck in his high post as he'd been, constantly wrangling with scheming Moff's and haggling with Alliance diplomats, he'd never had the opportunity to get into the crew pits and see things from the soldier's point of view.

The soldiers were changing, at least on the outside. Everything still seemed to be running with the crisp martial discipline that defined the Empire. And somehow that made him glad.

"Shuttle just came out of hyperspace," he heard the comm officer report.

"Good," Fy'lyor nodded. She stood on the center walkway over the crew pit, back straight, hands clasped tight behind her back, looking exactly like a captain should. She raised her voice. "Once all craft land, prepare to jump to hyperspace."

"Where to, captain?" asked the comm officer, a young human barely of his teens.

"Let's say system XB-903. I want to make sure we're not followed."

"Yes, captain."

"Flight deck, report," she barked.

"Shuttle is onboard. Last three X-wings are on board."

"Good. Navigation, warm up those hyperdrive and plot us a course."

"Yes, captain."

Jag watched Fy'lyor as she watched her crew buzz around. Whatever else you could say about the woman, she ran a tight, efficient ship.

He was deciding whether or not to compliment her for it when the sensor officer shouted, "Captain, we

have incoming vessels! They've just left hyperspace, bearing vector G-17!"

Some of the crew looked panicked, and the comm officer swore, but Fy'lyor marched fast across the bridge to the sensor station. "All stations go to red alert. What have we got, ensign?"

"I read four vessels, captain—"

"We have visual!" shouted telemetry as the alarm klaxons blared.

He didn't need to shout. Everyone could see it clearly through the ship's forward viewports: a sleek gray vessel, like a wide, flat Star Destroyer, was heading right for them. From the port and starboard viewports Jag could see two more, all of them aimed head-on for *Wessex*. Jag was sure the fourth one was coming from behind as well.

He ran from his quiet corner out across the bridge. When Fy'lyor heard his boot-claps she turned around and scowled, but he was a civilian, so décor be damned.

"Navigation, how long 'til hyperdive?" She snapped.

"Forty seconds, captain, but I'm not sure if we can plot a clear course. We're pretty boxed in right now."

The forward vessel fired bursts of energy from the cannon bank along its central spine. Blue energy lanced out, slipping through *Wessex*'s shields and dancing like lightning over its superstructure.

"Ion cannon blasts!" someone shouted. "Losing power on forward decks ten through fourteen."

"Hits to our engines, captain!" navigation reported. "Losing power on engines two and four!"

By that time Jag was right in front of Fy'lyor. He snapped, "Hail them. Hail them *now*."

"Do you know them?" Fy'lyor said. "Do you recognize those ships?"

Jag nodded, gravely.

“Are they Chiss?” she asked.

He nodded again.

“Communications, get us a line with that lead ship!” Fy'lyor stabbed a finger at the vessel looming out the forward viewpoint. She lowered her voice and said to Jag, “Why the sad face? I thought these blue boys were your friends.”

“Those are top-of-the-line vessels of the Chiss Ascendancy,” Jag said. “I was *exiled* from the Ascendancy ten years ago- long story, believe me.”

“And what about those Chiss friends you called in at Exodo III?” she asked, naming the place where Jag had laid siege to Admiral Daala's renegade forces.

“That was the Empire of the Hand, a splinter group of the Ascendancy founded by Grand Admiral Thrawn. We have family ties- another long story- but they are *not* these people. These people, I don't know.”

“Captain!” communications said, “We're getting contact from the front vessel. They're hailing us.”

“Very good, lieutenant,” Fy'lyor said, and did her best to assume a captain's bearing. “Put them on.”

The voice seemed to boom over the bridge's speakers. Its tone was haughty, cold, and imperious. It took Jag a second to recognize it. “Imperial strike cruiser, you will stand own immediately. Your vessel is now property of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet, Task Force Celestial, under the command of Commodore Wynnasa Fel.”

Fy'lyor looked to Jag. The man shrugged and said, “Well, I guess I *do* know them.”

Chapter 18

Jag thought it was a sign of his sister's confidence that she was the one to come onboard *Wessex*, instead of ordering them to her. It could have been a gesture of trust, too, an affirmation that no Imperial captain would try anything as mad as taking a Chiss officer hostage when her ship was surrounded by four larger vessels.

Fy'lyor wasn't going to do anything like that. As she, Jag, and SaBinring stood on the flight deck with an honor guard of a dozen stormtroopers, watching the Chiss shuttlecraft enter the bay, he watched her out of the corner of his eye. Her posture was perfect, her jaw clenched tight. Her hands were at her sides, balled into red fists. Her pride, as a person and as an Imperial officer, had been sharply wounded, but she wasn't going to do anything mad.

Jag also glanced at the big Gamorrean who towered over her. His face was harder to read, but he didn't think SaBinring would cause problems either.

As for Jag himself, well, if simple legality didn't get them off (he was dead certain they were currently outside Ascendancy territory) he was hoping familial

ties would do the trick. It would have helped if he'd seen his sister any time in the past ten years.

She was unmistakable regardless. When the shuttle's belly opened a procession of Chiss guards marched out onto the flight deck, clutching rifles to their chests. When they had arranged into two lines of ten, stretched out from the shuttle to the three captive delegates, Wynnsa finally stepped out of the shuttle. She was taller than he'd last remembered, and thinner. All the softness of youth had been cut away. She had her blond hair pulled back and tied at the nape of her neck, so a slim ponytail dangled over the shoulders of her matte-black uniform. She approached the delegates slowly. She must have recognized Jagged, though from that distance he couldn't discern her expression.

Wynnsa stopped two meters away from the delegates. Her eyes were dead-ahead on Fy'lyor. The two women's gazes, both stern and icy, met. They lingered for what seemed like forever before Fy'lyor said, "Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor, Imperial Intelligence. These are Mister Voort SaBinring of the Galactic Alliance and Mister Jagged Fel."

"An interesting crew," she said, passing them once over with her eyes. Hers met Jag's for just a second before she looked back to Fy'lyor.

The Twi'lek woman said, "With all due respect, Commodore Fel, we are outside the borders of the Chiss Ascendancy. You have no authority to detain and board this ship."

Wynnsa gestured to her guards. "If I wanted to take over your ship, I'd have brought more than this. I simply wanted to talk."

"Well, you clearly have us at attention," Fy'lyor said.

“We were observing the battle between the Yuuzhan Vong and Alliance fleets for some time,” Wynnsa explained. “When we finally decided to intervene, we noticed a handful of Alliance vessels behaving strangely, which jumped in the opposite direction of the rest of the fleet.”

“And so you followed us here,” Fy'lyor said. “May I ask which side you planned to intervene on behalf of?”

“Neither,” Wynnsa stiffened. “We were going to destroy them all.”

That took Fy'lyor aback. She said, “With all due respect, you only have four ships.”

Wynnsa smiled tightly, but said nothing.

It was SaBinring who cleared his throat and said, “Maybe we should take this conversation someplace else.”

“Agreed,” Wynnsa glanced at the Gamorrean. If she was surprised he could talk, she didn't show it. “Lieutenant Colonel, I trust you can find us a place to sit down?”

“Of course, Commodore.” Fy'lyor said, with the hint of a bitter smile. Jag didn't know which woman would win a fight, but it would be a most interesting match to watch.

Five minutes later they were seated in the main briefing room: Fy'lyor on one end of the oval table, Wynnsa on the other, Jag and SaBinring seated at the midsection. Two stormtroopers stood silent behind Fy'lyor. Two Chiss troops were behind Wynnsa. What the scene lacked in warmth, Jag thought, it made up for in symmetry.

Wynnsa leaned forward, clasping her hands on the table. “Well, I suppose I should start. The Chiss

Ascendancy recently observed unidentified fleet movements outside our borders, as well as indications of conflict. Naturally, they sent a fleet to investigate. I suspect the Empire noticed the same.”

“We did,” Fy'lyor confirmed.

“All understandable. But that does not explain why you have Alliance personnel and ships aboard *Wessex*.” Her eyes shifted to SaBinring.

The Gamorrean stared at her with his dark beady eyes. “We came on invitations. It was decided that the Empire and the Alliance would benefit by sharing information, as a possibility of a Yuuzhan Vong return would threaten the galaxy as a whole.”

“And what of Zonama Sekot, the mysterious traveling world where all the Yuuzhan Vong should have been exiled to? What became of it?”

SaBinring stared at her, but didn't respond.

“If you knew where it was, you would have set course for it immediately,” Wynnsa reasoned. “So you either found it, and it was heavily damaged or destroyed, or you didn't find the planet, and have been out of contact with it for some time. Given all the instability the Alliance has been having lately, I wouldn't be surprised at all if you lost a planet.”

Jag was no expert on reading him, but SaBinring didn't seem rise to the bait. He just stared with those little black eyes.

Wynnsa said, “Let's operate on the assumption that Zonama Sekot is missing in action, and this Yuuzhan Vong fleet is a rogue operation. That begs the question of what the *other* rogue fleet is. The vessels are almost entirely of Alliance manufacture, some of them top-of-the-line models, other not. Any rational being would assume that the Alliance has sent this fleet into the

Unknown Regions to hunt down and exterminate the Vong in secret.” She looked to Fy'lyor. “Do you agree?”

“That is my assumption,” the Twi'lek allowed.

“Then why did you allow an Alliance agent on your ship?” she looked to SaBinring again. “You're one strike cruiser, alone in a dangerous territory. It would be easy for his compatriots to sabotage this ship and escape with their cohorts, leaving the Empire none the wiser.”

“I assure you, I have taken all precautions against mutiny, and this ship is *far* from insecure.” Fy'lyor said. Her tone brooked no conflict.

“So what are you, Mister SaBinring?” Wynnsa asked. “Are you a double-agent, or do you honestly not know anything about this so-called-rogue Alliance fleet?”

“I know nothing,” SaBinring said immediately. “And neither does Alliance Intelligence.”

“Are you certain?” Wynnsa cocked a blond eyebrow.

“Absolutely. They would not send my people on a dangerous mission as part of some elaborate ploy.”

“You trust your superiors that much?”

“I do,” SaBinring said. His big lips curled upward, revealing a few extra inches of tusk. “Do you?”

Wynnsa leaned back in her chair and looked back at Fy'lyor. “Lieutenant Colonel, we currently have people sifting through the wreckage of the battle, looking for survivors or debris that might prove of interest. I'd be willing to share that information with you, on a few conditions.”

“Name them,” Fy'lyor said.

Wynnsa held up a finger. “Any survivors, Vong or otherwise, will be kept as prisoners of war by the Chiss Ascendancy and interrogated. We will permit Imperial

personnel to observe these interrogations, but the prisoners will remain in Ascendancy custody.”

Jag expected Fy'lyor to object, but she nodded.

Wynnsa held up a second finger. “We also reserve right to investigate the wreckage of any Yuuzhan Vong vessel. We have experience with Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology and would be very interested in learning how that technology has or hasn't changed since the last war.”

Fy'lyor shook her head. “No, not unless Imperial scientists have access to the same information.”

“I assure you that, in all modesty, Chiss scientists would do a much better job analyzing Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology. I'd also like to remind you that we can take whatever we want and leave *Wessex* crippled in unknown territory. We're speaking at all because it would be to our mutual benefit to cooperate.”

“You don't sound modest at all,” Fy'lyor gave a tight smile. “But I suspect you may be correct. However, I re-serve the right to take readings and tissues samples from all biotechnology before giving them over to the Chiss Ascendancy.”

“Agreed,” Wynnsa said. “And that leaves the debris of Alliance vessels. I'm thinking of that destroyed escort frigate, for a start. In this case, we admit that the Empire's knowledge of Alliance technology and ships is superior to ours. You can have them after we perform preliminary scans.”

“Agreed,” Fy'lyor nodded.

“And that leaves the last issue,” Wynnsa looked back to SaBinring. His face was as hard to read as ever, but Jag could feel his frustration from across the table. Wynnsa said, “We will not permit the sharing of intelligence data with the Alliance.”

Jag opened his mouth to object, but SaBinring beat him to it. "That's outrageous! That is a violation of our initial terms with the Empire!"

"The Lieutenant Colonel and I both agree that your government is too closely involved with the mystery fleet to be trustworthy," Wynnsa said. "Either your superiors are lying to you or your intelligence and asset tracking are a mess. Either way, it doesn't bode well for a partnership."

"The only way will be able to improve intelligence is to analyze that debris," SaBinring insisted, slamming a heavy clawed hand on the table.

Both of them looked to Fy'lyor. The woman sat back in her chair, hands folded in front of her. She said calmly, "We have already made an agreement with the Alliance."

"That's right," Jag spoke up for the first time. "And breaking that agreement would be a disaster in Imperial-Alliance ties."

"However," Fy'lyor said, still looking at Wynnsa, "Given the clandestine nature of this mission, the Alliance could never announce the reason for the rift publicly."

"That will not stop them," SaBinring growled. "If we go back empty-handed, *or* if we don't come back at all, the Alliance will come down hard on you. Even if they have to find a pretext, you can expect sanctions and a cut to military and intelligence cooperation."

"All that for your handful of operatives?" Wynnsa sounded skeptical.

"The Alliance values its people," SaBinring insisted. "And we have been just as much a part of this investigation as the Chiss or the Empire."

"I agree," Jag said, little too loudly, but it got all three eyes staring at him. "The Alliance operatives on this mission have done the bulk of the scout work, and unlike the Empire or Chiss, they have suffered losses in this mission."

"Exactly," SaBinring nodded. "I lost the daughter of one of my oldest friends back there. If you won't let us search for her body at least then you're all as savage as the Vong."

Wynnsa regarded him, but said nothing.

Jag looked to Fy'lyor and said, "We need the Alliance in this more than ever. If that fleet out there is renegade the Alliance will be the ones most able to identify its ships. And if there is some split going on in the Alliance hierarchy, well, I for one would like to know about it."

SaBinring spun in his chair to face her too. "I promise I will share all data we can glean from those ships with the Empire. If that fleet is renegade, you'll know. If it's on some secret mission, you'll know that too."

"That's a matter of your word, isn't it?" Fy'lyor said.

"It's always been about that," Jag looked across the table. "This has always been about trust. The fact that all of us are sitting here, right now, is a sign of trust. We just have to trust a little further."

SaBinring nodded. Fy'lyor looked down in thought. Wynnsa regarded her brother carefully, and did not flinch from his eyes, though he could read nothing in hers. Eventually she nodded and said, "Agreed. We will share all data on recovered Yuuzhan Vong and Alliance material."

"Thank you," Jag said. She only nodded.

It took them a good hour to lay out specific provisions for their mutual cooperation, and while toes

and claws were stepped on, the outright hostility seemed to have abated. Once the hour was up, all four of them rose to leave.

"Hold up, Commodore," Jag said. Wynnsa already at the door with a Chiss bodyguard on either side, spun to look at him.

"Would you like a word in private?" She asked.

"I would, yes."

"Very well." She gestured to her bodyguards, and they stepped out into the hall. SaBinring followed, then Fy'lyor and her stormtroopers. And then, finally, brother and sister were left standing in the empty conference room. He tried to run through his memories and picture the last time he and Wynnsa had been together. It had been before his exile, before his crash on Tenupe, before the Swarm War that had severed him from his old life with the Chiss for good, and left him drifting and rootless for years until he was pulled back into Jaina Solo's orbit.

She looked at him, saying nothing, like she was expecting him to talk first. He fumbled with his words, saying, "So, are mother and father well?"

"They are," Wynnsa nodded. "Father's retired from active service, but he still serves the CEDF in an advisory capacity."

"I heard about Cem," Jag said.

His Chiss aide, Asokaji, had brought him the news three years ago. Their younger brother had been killed by a Vagaari ambush while guarding a convoy on the outer edge of Chiss space. He'd died heroically, joining Chak, Davin, and Cheriss on the roll of martyred Fel children. It was just the two of them, now.

"You seem to have done well," he told her. "You're a Commodore now."

"Not half as well as you," she said. "You were Emperor,"

"Not Emperor, Head of State," he corrected. "I didn't want that job. And in the end I gave it up."

"Father was unhappy about that," she said. "He thought the Empire needs strong leadership to keeps the Moff's in line."

"He may be right," Jag said. "But Vitor Reige is no slouch."

"Perhaps." Wynnsa paused.

"I got married," Jag said, "But I suspect you heard."

"To your Jedi wife," Wynnsa said coolly. "I remember when you came back after the war, and how much you missed her. And I think I knew, even then, that you wouldn't stay with us forever. You'd seen too much of the galaxy to stay on Csilla."

"Maybe you're right," Jag said. "But exile was my mistake, not my choice."

"It was your choice to side with your Jedi friends against the Chiss," she said. "I guess it still is."

"I'm not siding with anyone," Jag said. "I don't *have* a side."

Wynnsa shook her head. "If you don't have a side, Jagged, it's because you refused to stick with one. Do you remember, when we were young, how *determined* you were? You swore to yourself you'd be the best pilot in the CEDF, even if you were handicapped by being human. You knew exactly what you wanted and you went for it." Her voice wavered for the first time. "I always admired you so much for that."

Wynnsa's eyes dropped from his, and he understood now. He knew, dead certain, that he would be standing in Wynnsa's place right now, a CEDF Commodore ready to take down any enemy of the Chiss, if it hadn't

been for Jaina Solo. Before the Yuuzhan Vong War, before he'd met her that fateful time on the *Ralroost* during the siege of Ithor, all he'd thought about was duty. No, not just duty, but his own pride, and his adolescent drive to prove himself to an entire civilization that saw him as alien and inferior. Jaina Solo had changed all that, and led his life down twisted paths and periods of wandering in the dark, only to come to the light at the end. But his sister had never seen that light, or wandered in the dark. Her life had been an arrow flying straight and true. He suddenly felt sad for her.

Maybe it showed on his face. She stiffened and said, "I got married too. But I don't think you heard that."

"No," Jag said. "When was this?"

"Not long after you did, coincidentally," Wynnsa paused. "I haven't heard about any children."

"No," Jag shook his head. "Not yet. You?"

Wynnsa shook hers. "I've been busy."

"Your husband... Is he CEDF?"

"Diplomatic Corps," she said. "Sometimes I envy him his quiet desk job."

"I'm sure it's much calmer than being married to a Jedi."

"I'm sure it is." She smiled, just a little.

"Wynnsa," he said, "Do you know more about what's going on here? More than you're telling?"

She frowned. It was all he could have expected, really.

"I'm sorry I asked," he said. "It's just... I fought the Yuuzhan Vong before. I've seen what they can do up close. I don't want that to happen again. If there have been worlds attacked or destroyed..."

"None that we know of," Wynnsa allowed, "But we only started tracking them recently."

"I see. Well, I suppose that's some good news."

Wynnsa shrugged noncomittedly.

"One other thing," Jag said. "You remember what SaBinring said, about losing a pilot."

"Yes," Wynnsa said. "Who was she?"

"She was the younger daughter of Wedge Antilles," he said. "Our cousin. Her name was Myri."

"Oh," Wynnsa showed a little shock. "I never knew her."

"I barely did," Jag said. "She looked a little like mother. Never acted like her though."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Wynnsa sounded sincere. "I'll relay that to mother and father, if you want."

"I think they should know," Jagged nodded.

"I will then." Wynnsa seemed to edge for the door.

"I understand, you have to go," Jag said. "Thank you for talking, just for a few minutes."

Wynnsa nodded, turned for the door, and then turned around again. She asked, "Jagged?"

"Yes?"

"Just what *are* you doing here? You're not Alliance, you're not Empire any more. Is this a Jedi thing?"

"The Jedi aren't involved," Jag shook his head. "Reige roped me into it."

"Ah. He sounds like a hard taskmaster, not letting you enjoy civilian life."

"I think it's just his paycheck for my shoving the job onto him in the first place." Jag laughed a little.

"Or because of your ties to the Alliance and the Jedi," she suggested.

"That too," Jag sighed. "You know, you said I never stuck with a side, and maybe you're right. But that doesn't mean I'm feckless, or that I'm derelict in my duty."

"I never implied you were," she said.

"Yes you did, and I don't blame you. Mother and father must think I'm the same."

"They're proud of you," she insisted. He wasn't sure if she was lying.

"Chiss, Empire, Alliance, Jedi, I only did what I thought was *right*." His eyes met hers, imploring. He couldn't read anything in them. They might as well have been the blank, glowing red eyes of a Chiss.

"Tell mother and father I love them." His voice wavered.

"Of course," she said, and stepped out the door. Jag watched it hiss shut behind her, and didn't move to follow.

Part III: An Unfound Door

Chapter 19

Ben walked into his father's chambers on Ossus under his own power. It had been days since he was wounded at Tatooine. The emergency medical team at Anchorhead, followed by some extra Jedi healing courtesy of Cilghal, had managed to fix most of his physical wounds, though he still did everything slowly, lest the wound on his side start hurting again.

As for the effects in his head, he wasn't quite sure how long those would last. A lot of it was simple shame. Shame at being drawn in by the girl, the girl who was young and angry but also kind of pretty, who reminded him too much of Vestara. Shame at being bested by her, and losing his own lightsaber to boot. Shame, finally, at losing the datarod containing Biggs Darklighter's last message to his father from forty-five years ago. Better than losing the other datarod, of course, but it was still something he ached to give his father. During their debriefing, he and Tahiri had explained everything else: Traygo's murder, the chase and crash, the meeting with Tusken, the shelter in a homestead (whose owners they did not name) and finally the confrontation at Tosche Station. Afterward,

Tahiri had stayed with Master Skywalker to explain something private, Ben didn't know what, but he had a feeling it didn't pertain to the old homestead. Nothing in his father's expression since then had indicated as much.

Although that was not always a reliable measure, not any more. During Luke Skywalker's period as Outcast, Ben felt himself bonding with his father as he never had before. However, ever since Luke's confrontation with Abeloth and his encounter with the Morath Monolith, he seemed to be getting distant again. He sent Ben and Tahiri off on all sorts of missions to all the corners of the galaxy, and held many secret meetings in the Jedi head-quarters on Ossus. Ben knew his father suspected there were more Sith out there, and not just the scattered remains of the One Tribe. Somehow that made him seem older, more grim and burdened than any other time save those awful days after his wife, Ben's mother, had been killed.

Now Ben walked into his father's quarters in the Temple. It was on the highest level of the ancient Jedi pyramid that the new Order had rebuilt since moving their headquarters to this world. Bright light shone through the window, revealing mottled clouds over arid, rocky mountains. Ben often heard older Jedi complain that Ossus seemed barren and sterile compared to Yavin 4, but right now he was just glad not to be on Tatooine.

Whether his father felt that way was anyone's guess.

His father, dressed in his dark Grand Master's robes, stood facing the window. He must have felt Ben enter, but he hadn't reacted. Ben waited in the doorway for a long moment and, when he got no response, rapped his knuckles against the doorframe.

"Hello, Ben," his father said without turning. "Are you doing better?"

"Yep," Ben stepped into the room. He moved with a slight limp but tried to hide it. "Good as new, more or less."

"More or less?" Luke turned around.

"Give me a day or two," Ben said, and sat down on the room's longest sofa. "We have that long, right? You just called the Jedi Council together today for tea and cookies, didn't you?"

"I wish I had," Luke smiled gently. He stepped away from the window, robes swishing behind him, and sat down next to Ben. He leaned forward, folding his hands and resting his elbows on his knees. "We've been running several missions lately, yours included, that all seem to point in a single direction, though we're still not entirely sure *what* that direction is."

"You mean those coordinates?" Ben asked. "We checked them in the *Shadow's* navcomputer. It looked like they were some place in the Unknown Regions. Not even a star system, just empty space."

"We'll get to that in the meeting," Luke said.

"Don't I get a preview?" Ben faked his best pout.

"Sorry, no spoilers," Luke pat his son on the knee. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay. You won't leave right away, but there's a mission in the offing."

"Of course I'll be ready," Ben said, "Especially if it gives me the chance to get my lightsaber back."

"Ah, yes, that," his father gave a sly smile. "Smarts, doesn't it, losing something that important?"

"You bet it does," Ben scowled. "Humiliating is what it is. I let her play me."

"Maybe," Luke said. "Though you might be interested to know that I did some checking. Cole

Fardreamer was the deck chief on the *Resilient*. He was killed at Fondor. His wife, Treena Varsong, died at the *other* Battle of Fondor, before you were born. Shortly before she died, she gave birth to one daughter, named Miranda.”

“Miranda,” Ben repeated. “Miranda Fardreamer... So she wasn't making it up.”

“What did you feel in the Force? If she got you to drop your guard, you must have felt something.”

“I felt sadness,” Ben said, “And anger. There was cunning underneath that, too, but I guess I didn't pick that part up until it was too late.” Just like Vestara, he thought. Maybe his dad thought so too, but neither of them said it. “She was very bitter about the Jedi. She blamed Jedi for both her parents dying. One time for making war, the other time for trying to stop it.”

“If only we'd been consistent, she'd have only lost one parent,” Luke observed.

Ben looked at his father. Was that a joke? His expression remained serious.

“The Jedi have always been a lightning rod for controversy, Ben. We have powers most being don't understand, and have always stood at the forefront of historical events. The Order has made mistakes, as has each and every individual Jedi, but I firmly believe the Jedi Order is a force for good in this galaxy, the best force there is.

“I remember Cole Fardreamer, you know. I'm very sorry about what happened to him and family. He reminded me of myself in a lot of ways. Young, ambitious, eager to please, even though he was just a lowly deck-hand. He was a good man, and he didn't deserve what happened to him.”

His father looked down at his hands. Ben said, "You know, it's funny. I'm used to all that anti-Jedi talk coming from sleemos like Daala. Hearing it from... Miranda... that was something different. In a way, I can't say I blame her. I mean, she's still *wrong*, I just.... don't blame her for being bitter."

"Everything we do has consequences, Ben, sometimes ones you can't predict. When I started training your cousin, all those years ago, how could I possibly know he'd indirectly cause the death of a boy from Tatooine who helped me on a mission once? The galaxy is a big place, and as Jedi we're naturally swept along in big events. If there's any lesson to draw from this, it's that you should always be mindful of those big events, and the effects they can have on the lives of everyday people."

"Oh," Ben said "I though the lesson was to stay away from girls with daddy issues."

As a joke, it hit too close to home to be funny. Nonetheless, Ben's father favored him with a smile. "There are many truths out there, Ben, and they all depend on the point of view we take. I'd say both our truths are pretty true."

"Fair enough," Ben shrugged.

Luke reached into the folds of his robe. "In the meantime, while you're waiting to get your saber back, you should probably have a loaner."

When his hand re-appeared, it was clutching a battered silver cylinder. Just looking at it made Ben's heart drop into his gut.

"That's Mom's," he said hoarsely.

"I think she'd want you to have it."

Ben took the lightsaber in both hands reverentially. He felt scared to thumb the weapon on. Instead he

hooked it carefully to the loop of his belt. It felt far heavier than it really was.

"I'll bring this back safe," he told his father.

Luke smiled gently. "I'm sure you will."

That trust meant more than Ben could say.

He blew out a tense breath and said, "So, do you think it's about time? I saw Jaina and Master Horn in the council chamber on the way here. The rest should be there by now."

"I think you're right, Ben." Luke Skywalker got to his feet and smoothed out his Jedi robes. "Come on, let's see how everyone else is doing."

As they walked toward the door, Ben asked, "Hey dad, I know we just talked about staying away from girls, but I'd really like to get my own saber back."

"As to that," his father said, "You'll just have to trust the Force."

Jaina still felt a little out of place among all the Masters. She wasn't in the Jedi Council and didn't attend these meetings regularly, so it still felt slightly surreal to hold the same rank as legends like Corran Horn and Kyle Katarn. She still remembered the brief, adolescent crush she'd had on Kyp Durrón during his fiery younger days, and now here she was, sitting next to him in the round, shallow arena Uncle Luke used for official meetings, waiting for him to show up.

Kyp was older now. His long dark hair, still tied back in a ponytail, was streaked with gray. He'd grown out a beard since she'd last seen him. It wasn't as shaggy as Kyle Katarn's or a groomed goatee like Corran Horn's. It looked like Kyp had forgotten to shave for a week and was pondering the results. For whatever reason, almost all the hair on his chin was gray. It wiped away

the last bits of youth on Kyp's face, but what it left in its place, Jaina couldn't decide.

She leaned in and said to him, "You really need to get rid of that."

"Get rid of what?" Kyp said, though his hand went to his chin.

"It makes you look old," she said.

"I was going for dignified," Kyp stroked the hair lightly.

"Kyp, you've been a lot of things, but I don't think you'll ever be dignified."

He feigned a hurt look. "You're insulting me. I played groomsman at your wedding and you insult me. I'm wounded, Jaina Solo. Grievously."

"Is it for a woman?" she asked. She liked teasing Kyp because it kept her mind off everything else.

Kyp didn't answer. He stared at the middle of the arena, as if he expected Luke to show up any minute. On the opposite side, diminutive Tahiri Veila sat a short distance from the massive Barabel Jedi Saba Sebatyne. Her armored shoulders hunched forward and she seemed deep in thought. Jaina knew that Saba still blamed herself for the death of fellow Council member Kenth Hamner during Luke's exile, even if no one else did. Tahiri, too, seemed apart. Unlike everyone else in the meeting, she did not wear Jedi robes but a dark-gray flight suit and vest with her lightsaber hanging off her belt. She'd been going on missions with Ben for months, and Luke had shown himself more than willing to accept her back into the Order, especially after her help in defeating Abeloth. Still, she never seemed fully comfortable on Ossus.

Jaina wanted to get her mind off them too. She decided harassing Kyp would be a lot more fun than

worrying about her problems. "So... is she a Jedi? Or a normal citizen of the galaxy?"

"Normal." Kyp allowed. He was smiling a little.

"Oooh, good. You can build bridges with the common folk. Just what we need right now. Is she classy?"

"More than me," Kyp allowed.

"Anyone I know?"

"No," said Kyp. "At least, I hope not."

"Playing it close to the chest now, huh?"

He shook his head. "When did you get like this? Aren't I supposed to be the one baiting a young kid like you?"

"I'm not a kid any more. I haven't been for a long time."

Kyp nodded. "We both got old young, didn't we?"

A sad smile creased his face. Jaina was going to say something when the door to the chamber slid open and Luke Skywalker stepped in, followed by Ben. Ben took a seat on the bench next to Tahiri.

Uncle Luke stepped into the center of the chamber, spread his hands in welcome, and said, "Thank you all for coming today. We have important business to discuss. Events will be happening soon that we must all be prepared for."

The room fell silent in anticipation. Even without the Force, Jaina could sense the grim expectancy in everyone. Barring the experience Luke and her parents had had at a Moranth Monolith earlier this year, things had been too uneventful. Everyone, Jaina especially, was waiting for the calm to break and for life to return to the state of strife they'd known most of their lives.

"Several things have come to a head at once, and it's time to act," Luke said. "Jaina, please make a report on

the occurrences at Yavin 4. I know you have much to tell us.”

Jaina nodded and rose to her feet. She felt all eyes drop on her and tried not to look at Ben. She and Luke had agreed to hide the news of Vestara's involvement for now, and she tried to pull her thought away from the Sith girl so Ben would not find a hint of their deception. Thankfully, that was easy. They'd found plenty of other horrors on Yavin 4.

She explained everything in detail: the 'honeymoon' she had taken with Tenel Ka, Allana, Zekk, and Taryn Zel; the exploration of the ruined Great Temple and the encounter with the voxyn (here Tahiri shuddered) and finally their pursuit of the voxyn to the ruins of Exar Kun's temple (Corran and Kyp both scowled). She explained that they had encountered a pair of Sith warriors and fought them to retreat. She did not mention Ship either.

When she sat down, everyone wanted to talk at once. Luke held up both hands and kept everyone quiet. Calmly, almost tiredly, he said, “Concurrent with this, Jaina's husband, Jagged Fel, was sent on the mission by Vitor Reige to examine a conflict taking place in the Unknown Regions, near the border of Imperial space. Jaina, would you like to explain this as well?”

Jaina nodded and got to her feet. Jagged had swung by Ossus on his way from Bastion to the Core to explain, in person, to herself and Luke what had transpired. Now she recounted everything that had happened to Jag in the past week: the finding of wrecked Yuuzhan Vong ships, the search with Imperial Intelligence and Wraith Squadron, the final encounter with a warring Yuuzhan Vong/Alliance fleet that ended only with the intervention of the Chiss.

Everyone took the news in soberly. When Jaina sat down, nobody tried to speak this time. They all watched Luke, like they were expecting him to drop a third hammer-blow.

“Finally, I recently sent my son and Tahiri Veila on a mission to Tatooine,” Luke said. Jaina had heard the gist of this already, first from Luke and then from Tahiri and Ben, but she could feel the surprise in Kyp and the others. She felt a little guilty for her family ties.

Ben got to his feet and explained everything. He explained how they'd traced Traygo from Korriban, how they'd interrupted the hand-off and had to chase their quarry halfway across Tatooine, and finally how they'd encountered the agent and retrieved Traygo's datacard, even if the agent herself got away.

When Ben explained that the datacard contained coordinates for a location in the Unknown Regions, it got everyone's attention.

Jaden Korr, a recent addition to the Council, raised his hand and asked, “Master Skywalker, do you plan on sending a mission to those coordinates?”

“I do,” Luke nodded. “There's no need to volunteer. I've already decided personnel, and while I appreciate your experience with the Unknown Regions, Master Korr, I have other tasks for you and your apprentice.”

Jaden looked a little disappointed, but nodded his acceptance.

Jaina leaned forward eagerly. This was the part she hadn't discussed with Luke yet, and she wanted to know his decision.

Luke said, “Jagged Fel is on Coruscant as we speak, finalizing plans for another, larger joint expedition between Alliance and Imperial forces into the Unknown Regions in search of the renegade fleets. He

is also bearing a message from me: We will give them our co-ordinates only if they agree to take a small contingent of Jedi with them. Given that they need all the information they can get for this mission; I don't expect a refusal."

"It would also be a peace offering between the Jedi and the Alliance," Corran pointed out.

"Exactly," Luke nodded.

Kyp raised a hand and didn't wait to be called on. "Master Skywalker, let me try and make sense of this. You're saying we're going to have Yuuzhan Vong and a renegade Alliance fleet on the loose, *plus* indications that some bunch of Sith- not our buddies from the Lost Tribe, but *another* group- are all bouncing around the Unknown Regions?"

"The Sith had *voxyn* with them," Jaina said. "If that's not a sign the Sith and Vong are connected, I don't know what is."

"Sith *and* Vong," Corran shook his head. "I can't think of a worse nightmare."

"What about Zonoma Sekot?" Saba Sebatyne spoke up. "Have we any succesz in hunting its location?"

Luke shook his head. "No, but I have a feeling it might be key to all this." Luke shifted his attention to Tahiri. "Miss Veila, you also close attachments to Zonama Sekot and the Yuuzhan Vong. I'd like you to go on this mission."

His tone had changed. He was not ordering a Jedi, but asking a woman with useful knowledge and skills.

Tahiri nodded firmly. "I'd be honored, Master Skywalker."

"Ben, I'd like you to go on this mission too," he said.

Now he was ordering. Ben gave a determined nod but Jaina tried to hide her surprise. Ben had only been

on Zonama Sekot briefly, as a small child, and he had no knowledge of the Unknown Regions. More than that, if Vestara Khai and her Sith pals *were* connected with the Vong, there was a good chance Ben would re-encounter the girl somewhere in dangerous space.

While she was still processing possibilities, Luke looked to Jaina and said, "Finally, Master Solo, I'd like you to join them."

Jaina stiffened. She shouldn't have been surprised, but she was. She met Luke's eyes and tried to discern the intent, but she got nothing, even in the Force. Did he want her to the the Sword of the Jedi, cutting down Vong and Sith like she's spent most of your youth and young adulthood doing? Did he want her to guide Tahiri, protect Ben? She got nothing from him, nothing at all, except a nudge of encouragement. He was getting more cryptically Yoda-like by the day.

As usual, Kyp said what was on everyone's minds. "Master Skywalker, what will you be doing while the three of them go chasing phantoms? What will the *rest* of us be doing?"

"Chasing *other* phantoms." Luke set his lips in a grim line. "We're going to sent teams to Korriban, Ziost, Ambria, Onderon, Vjun, Kesh, and every other planet known to harbor Sith in the past. We're going to find them and get rid of them."

A chill settled over the group. Jaden Korr asked, "Master Skywalker, does that mean—"

"We're going to end it," Luke said firmly. "We're going to end everything." He glanced at Jaina, Tahiri, and Ben all in a line. "I'll be needed to command and coordinate the hunting parties. But the Force is telling me that the most important tasks will fall with you three."

“We won't fail you,” Ben said firmly. He seemed to believe it.

“I believe in all of you,” Luke said, and though he didn't speak it out loud, all three of them felt his message clear in the Force: *I need you to believe in yourselves.*

Jaina felt shaken somewhere, deep inside. She suddenly felt like crying, but she held in tears and stifled the regret. She'd gotten good at that.

Chapter 20

After a perilous sojourn in the dark, it felt strange being in the bright center of it all.

The meeting took place in the Galactic Alliance Chief of State's office. It was a location Jagged had been in many times before, when he had been head of the Empire and had constantly had to face off with Daala. Wynn Dorvan, her chief of staff, had been a friendly face then, and Jag had come to appreciate the honest help the man tried to give and trust his judgment when it came to untangling the messy situations he and Daala often caught each other in. Now the office was Dorvan's own. He hadn't changed the actual arrangement of the place much- the desk still had its back to the window, the shelves were still half-full with datapads- but just by having Dorvan in that seat, he felt assured that every-thing was better.

He tried to take comfort from Dorvan, and the other beings gathered in Dorvan's office. All of them were on their feet, belying the tension of the meeting: Chief of State Dorvan, half-seated on the edge of his desk, Director of Intelligence Loran, Supreme Allied Commander Nek Bwa'tu, Wraith Leader SaBinring, and

Naval Intelligence captain Syal Antilles. He felt full trust in all of them, and he tried to cling to that trust, because it was the only piece of solace he had against the potentially catastrophic threat in the Unknown Regions.

It was strange that he felt the least connection to his own cousin. When he'd arrived at the meeting he'd been surprised to see her, but quickly understood when she began to brief those gathered on what she had found while overseeing the search for missing Alliance ships. She had laid it all out for them in cool, professional tones, betraying none of the grief she must have felt at the loss of her sister, loss Jagged felt inexplicably to blame for.

Syal had explained that their efforts to track down missing Alliance capital ships had been very difficult; the Alliance had a habit of selling off old, obsolete spacecraft to planetary governments for local defense purposes, and it was hard to keep track of them after that. Nonetheless, when collated with the data retrieved from the Wraiths' ships after the battle in the Unknown Regions, certain conclusions could be drawn.

A holoprojector played on Dorvan's desk and beamed holo-cam footage from one of the Wraith's X-wings. Syal froze it periodically and pointed out specific ships that she'd been able to positively identify.

She was pointing at an old *Victory*-class Star Destroyer while she explained, "If you look closely, you can see the modifications on the forward turbolaser batteries. This was a retrofit adopted by the Empire shortly after the death of Grand Admiral Thrawn, when they were getting desperate and needed to optimize firepower on all their vessels, even older ones."

“So it's an Imperial craft?” Dorvan asked, a tone of faint hope in his voice.

Syal shook her head. “No, sir. If you look on the dorsal side, you can make out the faded New Republic crest. The Republic only captured a handful of these retro-fitted Vics, and only one of them is unaccounted for.”

“Which one?” Loran said. He had his arms crossed over his chest and wore a look of furious concentration, as though he were trying to remember on his own.

“Most likely, this ship is the *Revolutionary*, belonging to Captain Kalla Auburn.”

“I remember him,” Loran said. “Vaguely. Imperial, defected to the Republic shortly *before* the treaty, which was odd timing.”

“He defected to be with his wife, a local senator on Nubia.”

“Ah,” Bwa'tu shook his head. “She died in the Vong War, then?”

Syal nodded. Jagged knew she had lost a lover in Jacen Solo's war, and probably everyone else did too. They avoided her loss-haunted eyes even as they listened to her words.

“It stands to reason that these are going to be old ships, led by commanders who fought in the Vong War,” SaBinring said dryly. “People who lost something important.”

Syal made a slight adjustment on the holocam. It played for two more seconds then froze. She zoomed in on the image of an old *Majestic*-class cruiser.

“New Class Warship,” Bwa'tu said. “There was a very limited run of those, and most of them went to the Fifth Fleet, though they're all scuttled from service by now.”

Syal nodded coolly. "We've identified that one as belonging to Terra Vatrim."

Bwa'tu, once the chief admiral of the Fifth, looked thoughtful. "Human, from Rhinnal, I believe. By now she must be quite old."

Syal nodded. "She started as a sub-commander in the Black Fleet Crisis, then got promoted by personal request of General A'Baht after the Battle of N'Zoth. She saw plenty of combat against the Vong, especially during the early, bloody stages of the conflict. She commanded a battle group that lost most of its ships at the Battle of Fondor, though the *Sunbeam* survived."

"What did she do after the Vong War?"

"Retirement," Syal said. "She stayed out of the recent war also. *Sunbeam* was sold to the local defense fleet at Esseles about fifteen months ago."

"Clearly, someone convinced her to re-enlist," Dorvan said.

If he was expecting Syal to offer a name, he got nothing. An awkward silence settled over the room, as though each of them were left to stew in their own ignorance.

Finally, Jagged spoke up. "I must point out that there are three Bothan Assault Cruisers in this fleet. That should be indicative of something."

"We haven't been able to identify them," Syal said quickly, to draw attention away from an awkward-looking Nek Bwa'tu. She said, "We've contacted the Bothan government but so far we have not worked out an intelligence-sharing agreement."

Bwa'tu sighed and said, "My peoples' government has officially sworn off the ar'krai policy of total war against the Vong, but it was extremely controversial at home. As you know, my predecessor, Traest Kre'fey,

was forced into retirement due to pressure from ar'krai elements in Drev'starn."

"No one has questioned your *krevi*, Admiral," Dorvan said, referring to the Bothan oath of total loyalty.

"I know, and I thank you," Bwa'tu said. "Thankfully, the Bothan government is more unified now than it was fifteen years ago. Ar'krai elements have been pushed to the fringe, which may be why this fleet has appeared now. Captain Antilles, I'll contact the Bothan military personally. I'll also have my uncle Eramuth call in favors with people in the civilian government. We're not exactly popular in Drev'starn, but we can exert pressure where it counts." He bared two fangs in a Bothan smile. "I don't relish games of influence, but I know how to play them."

"We're glad of that, thank you," Dorvan said.

"May I ask how long we're willing to wait for the Bothans to comply" Jagged asked. "These fleets are still out there, fighting. If we're going to intervene, we should do so soon."

"*We?*" Bwa'tu cocked his head. "As far as I am aware, you an Imperial citizen, without any official rank in their government and certainly not in ours."

"I've come this far to lend you my skills." Jag said, more harshly than intended. He was getting sick of people questioning his loyalties. "I feel my expertise could be of value still."

"And what value is that, precisely?" Loran asked.

"If we run into my sister, or any other Chiss fleet, I'll be an essential intermediary." Jag ticked off one finger, then another. "I have more experience in the Unknown Regions than anyone in your military or intelligence organizations. I have first-hand knowledge of fighting

the Vong, which even some of your commanders, including very capable ones, do not.”

Syal accepted the compliment with a halfhearted nod.

“Finally, because of my, as you say, unofficial status, I am ideally placed to liaise between cooperating elements of the mission and defuse potential conflicts.”

“What cooperating elements?” Bwa'tu asked, his tone still hostile but controlled.

“Alliance. Imperial. Chiss, if they decide to join. Jedi, if you decide to let them.”

He'd already laid out Luke Skywalker's proposal and gotten a chill reception. This time, when he said the J-word, everyone visibly stiffened, even big, broad SaBinring. Jag did not believe anyone in the room had anti-Jedi prejudices, but he knew the political situation was very touchy at the moment.

Eyes seemed to shift to Dorvan, as though everyone was passing the proverbial credit to the Chief of State.

The man sighed and said, “This is to be a top-secret mission, so I'm not as concerned about bad press as I would be otherwise. I still have concerns.”

“What are they?” Jag asked, volunteering himself once again as the Jedi's advocate.

“Master Skywalker picked interesting choices for his time. There's Tahiri Veila. How do the Imperials feel about working with her?”

“They don't know yet. But I've given her official pardon after she rendered valuable services to the Empire. In any case, she knows Zonama Sekot and the Vong better than anyone in the known galaxy.”

“Another compelling case,” Dorvan sighed. “Then there's Skywalker's son, who seems the least experienced, but also the least objectionable.”

“Go on,” Jag said. Jaina came last.

A slight, wry smile touched his lips. "As for Master Solo, well, do you think you can keep your wife in line?"

"No one can keep Jaina in line," Jag allowed his own smile. "She's too much of her father in her."

"Well, you're going to have to try, because she'll be answerable to you, just like everyone else."

Jag stiffened. He felt a faint sense of dread. "Excuse me, sir?"

"We made the decision before you arrived," Bwa'tu said. "Because of what you called your unique position, we decided to make you commander of the next mission."

"Me?" Jag's jaw dropped. He'd been willing to offer his service and expertise, yes. A minute ago he'd been practically *begging* them to let him come. Actually commanding an entire mission this risky, critical, and frankly unknowable was another matter entirely. "But, what about the Empire?"

"I've already talked to Vitor Reige," Dorvan said. "He seems to think you're a fine choice."

That, or he was looking to punish Jag some more. His mind whirled and he tried to hold on to something. "Are you saying I am going to command a joint Alliance-Imperial-Jedi task force in the Unknown Regions?"

"Exactly," Bwa'tu said. "We've also sent out feelers to the Chiss, for whatever that's worth. Commander Antilles here has been chosen to lead the Alliance ships. SaBinring and the Wraiths will accompany. I understand that the Imperial ships will once again be led by Lieutenant Colonel Fy'lyor."

The thought of Fy'lyor and Jaina sharing a room left Jagged terrified and faintly aroused. He looked at

Dorvan, then Bwa'tu, and finally Loran, whose face, usually lightened by casual mirth, looked grimly serious.

"This isn't a joke then," Jag said.

"No," Syal spoke up. "It's not a joke at all."

"I guess not." Jag let go of a breath he didn't remember holding.

"We're leaving it up to you to keep all parties in line," Bwa'tu said. "Alliance, Imperial, Chiss, Jedi. And Jaina."

"That last one," said Jag, "Might by the trickiest."

"We know," Loran allowed a smile at last. "We agreed you were the only man who could handle the challenge."

"I feel flattered," Jag tried a smile of his own. "And grateful, honestly. And also a little scared."

"You should be," Syal said. Everyone met her eyes and the humor drained from the room. She crossed her arms over his chest and said again, "You all should be scared."

After the meeting at the Chief of State's office, Syal Antilles took a speeder directly to her quarters. She had moved into them just two months previous, after being recalled from duty on Fondor on what was supposed to have been a tempotery reassignment. It was a spacious flat, purchased cheaply because of its proximity to the areas damaged by the recent Sith attacks. After hearing of Myri's death, her parents had taken the first flight to Coruscant and were now staying in her apartment. She did not want to return, but she knew she had to face her family before leaving for the Unknown Regions, and she might as well get it out of the way now.

When she arrived she was surprised to find not just her parents standing in her kitchen, but two more people of the same age. She could not resent the intrusion; Tycho Celchu and his wife Winter had been like second parents to her, and naturally they would want to be with their close friends at this sad moment.

"Hello, Syal," Winter said softly. She wore a dark, plain dress that contrasted to the white of her hair. She didn't say she was sorry, and Syal was glad. She put on her bravest smile instead.

"Thank you for coming," she said, though she wanted nothing more than to go into her room and close the door on everyone. Grief made her act like a helpless child.

"Wedge told me you were over at headquarters," Tycho said. He and her father were standing in the corner, each with a slim glass of ale in hand. Her father looked at her with very tired eyes that she couldn't bring herself to meet.

"That's right," Syal said. "We had a meeting in the Chief of State's office."

On a mission of this import, a grieving family would normally be kept in the dark, but the Antilles family was not a normal one. Garik Loran had personally brought the news to Wedge and Iella before the Wraiths returned from the Unknown Regions, and he had explained everything.

"What did he have to say?" her mother asked. Her arms were crossed over her chest. Her face was blank and her voice even. She seemed to be taking things better than her husband, at least a little.

"We leave in two days," she said.

"For the Unknown Regions?" Tycho asked.

Unsurprisingly, her parents had filled him in.

"We're retrieved coordinates courtesy of Master Skywalker and the Jedi," Syal said. There didn't seem a point in hiding anything. "We'll be working with them as well as an Imperial delegation. Possibly the Chiss as well."

"Who commands?" Tycho asked.

"I'll be in charge of Alliance flagship," she said. None of them showed surprise, or anything else. "The overall fleet will be coordinated by Jagged Fel."

Tycho raised white eyebrows, but her parents betrayed nothing. Syal barely knew her cousin, but the idea of going out into the Unknown Regions with Fel, chasing the ships that had killed Myri, didn't intimidate her. If anything, it gave her a small bit of comfort; not because Fel was family, but because he was a disciplined professional. She preferred working with that type; she'd never have been able to share a mission with her sister.

"Two days," her father said. "It sounds like you'll be busy, then."

"We will," Syal nodded. "We have a busy day tomorrow, so if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get some rest."

"Of course," Tycho put his drink down. "Winter and I can—"

"Stay, please." Syal tried to smile but didn't have it in her. "It's good seeing you all together again."

She turned and walked into her bedroom without another room. The window-shades were pulled down and room was dark, with only a thin shaft of light from the open doorway cutting through the gloom. She got to the bed and halfway fell onto it. She managed to pull off the polished black boots of her uniform and undo the top two buttons around her neck before she fell back

on her bed. She rested face-up and stared at the shaft of light that cut across her ceiling.

She felt exhausted and empty. She tried to feel something about the mission to come- anxiety, eagerness, fear, anything- and could not. It had been this way after Tiom died too. The entire universe had seemed a black empty thing and her actions inconsequential. There hadn't seemed a point in anything. She felt the same now, maybe worse. She could have risen, taken off her uniform, and showered, but she didn't move. There didn't seem to be a point.

She didn't know how long she lay there before a shadow filled the light-shaft. The shadow shifted out of the light and she felt her bed shift under additional weight. She felt a hand, rough and worn, reach out to touch the side of her face.

She jerked her head away, but her father reached out again to stroke her cheek. She didn't say anything and neither did she. She didn't choke or sob, but tears ran silently from her eyes. She tried to blink them away but they did not stop. Her father wiped them away.

Epilogue: Visions of the Future

Sometimes, just sometimes, Natasi Daala thought she could get used to retirement.

It had happened before, a long time ago. She'd been utterly humiliated at Yavin 4, when her attempt to destroy the new Jedi Order in its infancy had been met with disaster. After the destruction of the *Knight Hammer*, she had set down her rank and authority, left the Empire in the capable hands of Gilad Pellaeon, and tried to find a new life for herself somewhere in the galaxy. And to her own amazement, she'd actually found one, on a dismal hellhole of a world called Nam Chorios. Liegeus had aged much since she'd last seen him, been through some terrible experiences, but then, so had she. Together with Liegeus, she'd retired from a life of warfare and duty and surrendered herself to simple pleasures. It had been a strange experience, unsettling at first. She'd wake up in the middle of the night after dreams of standing on a burning vessel's bridge, or hearing the phantom sounds of emergency klaxons. It had been Liegeus, calm wise Liegeus, who

had soothed her nerves and taught her, slowly but surely, that a peaceful life was a fine one to live.

Liegeus was long dead now. Gil Pellaeon, right before his death, had called on her again, and when she mus-tered her fleet for attack at Fondor, she'd been shocked to feel the adrenaline rush that made her feel a decade younger. She'd been wary to accept commands of the Galactic Alliance at first for dozens of reasons, not the least her earlier battles with the Rebel Alliance from which it had grown. But it had been plain to her that some strong hand was needed to hold the galaxy's largest political union together. The Jedi were running amok, declaring themselves dictators and squashing anything that disagreed with their narrow, self-righteous vision of how the galaxy could be won. The Corellians, Bothans, and other independent-minded worlds had wanted their own special privileges, demanding favors from the Alliance without paying their fare due. It hadn't taken long for Daala to loathe having taken the job in the first place. Yet somehow, she didn't regret it. Then, as ever, she had done what was necessary to restore order to a chaotic galaxy, and the reign in the Jedi fanatics who could never stop fighting each other over petty religious differences.

But now she was retired again. After her abortive attempt to unseat Jagged Fel as head of the Empire, Vitor Reige had graciously allowed her to retire quietly to a private estate on Orinda. She had acres of land for her own, and a home set halfway into the side of a mountain. At dawn the system's rosy sunlight would stretch across the plain below, making the wheat-fields glimmer like a million precious jewels. It was the most wonderful view in the Empire. She could almost get used to it, but not quite.

She had no Liegeus now, no one to calm her, no one to convince her that peace was the normal state of a being's life. She still dreamed of fiery battleships, and this time when she woke up she felt disappointed.

She lived alone on Orinda, though she had several droids to help with maintaining the estate. She'd taken them apart, examined the pieces, and put them together again one-by-one. She'd examined every wall, nook, and crevice of her estate. She'd found no proof of surveillance devices, but she knew they were there somewhere. Vitor Reige wouldn't turn his back on her entirely. If he did, he was a fool.

One night Daala's dreams were more vivid than usual. She was onboard a Star Destroyer again. Its bridge was burning. A massive craft loomed ahead of her: long and daggerlike, but jagged and organic looking, like a lumpy Mon Calamari cruiser, only moreso. A Yuuzhan Vong ship, perhaps? Somehow, she couldn't be sure.

Her ship was burning, and the enemy ship loomed ahead. She shouted to her crew to abandon ship. Everyone but a skeleton crew to the escape pods. In a dream-instant, they were all gone except for a handful at weapons and engine stations. She stabbed a finger at the Vong ship and gave the order: Ramming speed. Her crew was a good crew. They obeyed without hesitation. Her crippled star destroyed lurched as navigation brought the engines back on line, almost knocking her off her feet. She braced herself against the forward viewport, pressing both palms flat against the cool trans-paristeel. She stared at the Vong ship as it grew closer and closer. It brought its weapons to bear, firing volcanic death at her, but nothing could stop her. Debris slammed into the viewport, and hairline cracks slithered through the transparisteel, tickling her palm,

but she didn't let go. She leaned in closer. She saw the prow of her vessel stab into the heart of the Vong ship, shearing away yorik coral and steel in equal measure. The ship groaned, buckled again, but it stabbed deeper and deeper into the enemy craft. The hairline fractures snapped and cracked under her hands. The viewport shattered, opening the bridge to fire and space. Daala felt herself swept off her feet, plunging even faster than her dying vessel, closer and closer to the Vong ship, into its beautiful blossom of flame.

And then she woke up.

An alarm was blaring. She stared around her empty bedroom, wondering if she was still dreaming. But it wailed and wailed. In her sleepy confusion, it took her almost a minute to realize she was being messaged.

She scrambled for the secret communications array in her bedroom. This was something she'd installed herself, but she'd only used it once or twice for fear of Reige finding out. Only a handful of beings knew how to reach her. Before switching on the holo she looked down at her disheveled hair and nightgown. She shrugged and flicked it on anyway. She was far too old to be vain.

The blurred, blue face of Drikl Lecersen looked back at her. It wasn't a face she'd been especially eager to see; Even by Imperial Moff standards, Lecersen was as slimy as a greased eel. He'd plotted first against the Hapans, then against Jacen Solo, then against Jagged Fel, then against Daala herself, though she'd later been able to wrangle an alliance out of him. The fact that he hadn't been killed a half-dozen times already was credit to his cleverness, if nothing else. Like Daala herself, he'd been stripped of all rank after their failed attempt to wrest control from Jagged Fel.

If he just wanted to complain about retirement, she wasn't in the mood.

"I'm so sorry," Lecersen said, "I forgot what time it was for you."

Daala doubted that. "What do you want, Drikl? Make it quick. I'm not sure how secure this line is."

"Well, Natasi, there's no need to be snappy. I assure you I've taken all precautions to encrypt this message."

"Out with it. Now."

"All right. I still have some contacts on Yaga Minor, and they've been feeding me some very interesting rumors."

"Rumors?" Daala frowned. "Is that what you called me in the middle of the night for? Canteen gossip?"

"Hardly. First it was gossip, but now I've got something more substantial."

"Such as?"

His lips spread to reveal white teeth. "The Yuuzhan Vong. They're back."

Daala jerked to attention. "What? How do you know?"

Lecersen seemed more amused than nervous. "All in good time. The question is, Admiral Daala, do you think you have one more war left in you?"

She stared at Lecersen's blurry, blue smile for what seemed like forever. Eventually, she found herself nodding.

Healing was not a Sith skill, but Vestara Khai had picked up many useful things during her sojourn with the Skywalkers. They'd taught her how to retreat within herself, to focus on the strength and warmth within her and to merge it with the Force to mend the parts of her body that were cold and broken. She spent a long time

lying on the deck of Ship, existing in a strange midpoint between sleep and waking as she tried to mend the damage Jaina and Tenel Ka had dealt her during the fight on Yavin 4.

But like most Jedi tricks, it only did so much. No amount of Force-enhanced meditation was going to replace her lost arm. It certainly couldn't heal the damage to Vestara's soul. There had been too many betrayals, by her and against her, for that.

When she felt she had enough strength, she pushed herself off the floor. She tried it the first time, failed, and remembered that she only had one arm. All that was left of the other was a cauterized stump, the parting gift of Jaina Solo's lightsaber, buried beneath several layers of bacta bandages she had not administered herself.

She had enough strength to push herself upright with her remaining arm. She straightened her back and flexed her aching shoulders; they felt strangely light with only one arm to support.

Then she saw the figure sitting a meter across the floor. He sat with his legs crossed, back straight. He was covered in black robes except for his hands and face, both of which were an ominous, artful sprawl of red and black patterns. The Devaronian's two long horns and needle-like teeth, visible through lightly pursed lips, completed the image of ancient malice. She expected to see predatory hunger in his eyes, red-orange with black pupils, but instead she saw... patience.

"I'll live," Vestara grunted, though he hadn't expressed any concern and she hadn't sensed any in the Force. His presence was dark, determined, angry, much like that of her father and the other members of the

Lost Tribe of the Sith she had spent most of her life with. Like her own, she supposed. However, unlike the other Dark Side auras she'd known, this one also seemed calm and confident.

"Did we get them?" Vestara asked. "Did we get what we came for?"

"The Holocrons of Naga Sadow are in our possession," Darth Vidious said. "Darth Wyyrlok should be very pleased."

Even when she'd agreed to go with him to Yavin 4, she'd half-expected this mysterious man to kill her once she helped him get his precious artifacts. It would be the typical Sith thing to do, after all. She'd been at his mercy, wounded and helpless, for hours if not days, and best she could tell, all he'd done was dress her wound.

Vestara didn't trust kindness. She almost had, once, and regretted it. She'd been born a Sith, made a Sith, and she'd die one too whether she liked it or not.

"Where are we going?" she asked, not bothering to veil the suspicion on her voice.

For some reason, Vidious chuckled. It didn't befit his demonic image. He said, "We are going deep into the Unknown Regions, Vestara Khai."

"Is that where we deliver those holocrons?"

"Among other things."

Vestara blew out a long breath. "You know, I thought we'd be going to Korriban. I sensed your peoples' presence there when I was there, a few years ago. That *was* you, wasn't it? Or is there a *third* faction of Sith floating around?"

"We have since abandoned Korriban," Vidious said. "The Jedi were becoming too alert to our presence. Besides, we had other business"

"Have you met any others... like me?" she had to ask. She hadn't seen or heard anything about the Lost Tribe since the battle at Coruscant two years ago, when she'd betrayed Jedi and Lost Tribe alike and turned both into her enemies. They would never take her back, and she'd never want to go back... but she was still curious as to the fate of the people she'd spent most of her life with. The tribe she'd lost.

"We have encountered several," Vidious said.

"And?" Vestara's breath caught in her chest.

"They were not worthy," the Devaronian said darkly.

She might have felt sadness, knowing members of the Lost Tribe had fallen to... whatever this second Sith clan was. Instead she felt a dull emptiness, like the last remnants of her youth had finally disappeared.

"And I was worthy?" she asked.

"You were willing to make a sacrifice." He made a small gesture to the stump of her arm.

She wanted to ask if she could get a replacement arm, but was afraid of looking weak. Vidious must have sensed this. He shook his head and said, "Our leader is not averse to prosthetics. However, some of our allies are, so you'll have to make due for now."

"Your leader? Are we going to meet him?"

Vidious shook his head. "Perhaps. That is not for me to know. But do not fear. All will be explained soon enough, Vestara Khai."

"Well, that's a relief," she muttered. "I hate being stuck in the dark."

Vidious chuckled, like she'd said something funny. "I believe you have much potential."

As do I, Lady Khai, said a voice in her head.

Ship! Her mouth slacked open. The sentient machine in whose belly those rode hadn't touched her thoughts

since the battle on Yavin 4. Despite its constant presence in her thoughts for many years, she'd almost forgotten it was there.

Rest assured, Lady Khai, it said, This man will take us somewhere very powerful. I can feel it. This is what I've been waiting for my many centuries in exile.

Vestara glanced at Vidious wondering if he, too, could hear Ship. His face was blank, betraying nothing.

"What do you want?" Vestara asked both aloud. "What's your goal in all this?"

I wish to become a more perfect vessel of the Dark, said Ship.

"The Jedi are weak," Vidious said. "The Alliance from which they have broken is weaker. The time is perfect to destroy both and re-establish the dominance of the Sith."

"And the holocrons will help you do that?"

"The holocrons will help to heal our Master. And when he is ready..." For the first time, dark hunger blazed in his eyes. "Finally, the time will come to reveal ourselves to the Jedi. Then, we shall have our revenge."

And you, Lady Khai, will become a perfect vessel too.

To both their declarations, she could only nod. Then and there, in the belly of the ancient Sith ship with a new Sith warrior seated before her, she believed everything they said.

She woke up.

At first there was only light. Soft colors floated past in a formless haze: whites, pastel blues, and rosy pinks. Sometimes strands would seem to hover in front of her, waving gently: dark browns and vivid reds. She felt weightless, and empty.

Slowly, her vision sharpened. The soft colors became a bubbles drifting through a translucent fluid. The strands were trails of long dyed hair. She felt sensations, too. Bubbles tickled her bare skin, while the medical wrappings around her chest and bottom shifted ever so slightly.

She slept, and she woke up. She didn't know how long she floated in the haze, but when they pulled her out of the bacta tank she didn't want to go.

The medical droid was an old 2-1B. His faceplate was chipped in a few places, but he was as polite and efficient as any other medical droid she'd known. He escorted her to a small white room with a soft white bed. He lay her down and pulled the covers over her. She slept. She waited. By now she had already realized that she was a prisoner.

She didn't know how much time passed before her visitor came. She was lying in the bed, staring up at the unfamiliar ceiling, listening to the barely-audible hum of the ship's engines, when the door hissed open. She turned her head. A Bothan, wearing the white uniform of a Galactic Alliance admiral, stepped into her room. He had his paws clasped in front of him. Small golden eyes stared at her from a face of smooth silver fur. After the door slid shut behind him, he said, "I'm glad you're awake. They weren't sure you were going to make it at first."

Myri struggled to sit upright. She still felt dizzy, and had to prop herself up against the wall. She said, "Who are you?" Her throat was dry, and the words cracked.

"Take some water," the Bothan said. He gestured to a bottle on her bedstand.

Myri took it, drank, and said, "Am I a prisoner?"

The Bothan shook his head. "Why do you think that?"

"I was hit... I ejected. You're the fleet we were following."

"Apparently so, but I'm very interested to know who this 'we' is," the Bothan said. "We did notice some unusual activity during the battle, some unregistered ships on the edge of the combat zone, but we had bigger concerns, as I'm sure you noticed." He pulled up a stool and sat down next to her bed. "Tell me, are you Alliance Intelligence?"

Myri regarded those gold eyes, trying to find his intentions. He didn't look threatening, but looks could be very deceptive, especially where Bothans were concerned.

"All right, I'll go first," he said. "My name is Bren Aref'ja. You are aboard my flagship, *Phoenix*. I attended the New Republic military academy, fought for the Alliance during the Yuuzhan Vong War, and fought for the confederacy during the Civil War. I'm currently wearing an Alliance uniform again and calling myself an Admiral, but those are not government-sanctioned. In fact, I was never more than a Commodore. I'm putting them on as a show of military order and discipline in this fleet we've put together."

Myri stared at those gold eyes for a long time. Then she said, "My name is Myri Antilles. I was sent by Alliance authorities to track you down."

"You and your team," Aref'ja nodded. "I would ask more about them, but I have a feeling you're not in the mood to tell me now." He scratched his neck fur with one claw, then asked, "Tell me, are you the daughter of Wedge Antilles?"

Myri blinked. Getting that question was shockingly, well, normal. "Do you know my father?"

“Not closely, but I met him several times in official capacities. I'm not sure if he'd remember me. Still, when I was at the academy I admired him greatly. We all did. I spent most of the Vong War as a deck officer, serving under Admiral Kre'fey on the *Ralroost*, though I gained my own command during the last stages of the conflict.”

“Admiral Kre'fey,” Myri thought for a moment. The Bothan admiral who had ended the Vong War as Supreme Commander of the entire Alliance military, vaunted as the hero who retook Coruscant, only to retire abruptly a year later, purportedly over political pressure from Bothan hardliners who wanted to continue ar'krai, the total war against the Yuuzhan Vong their species declared after the death of Borsk Fey'lya.

“The Admiral and I fought together again during the recent Civil War,” Aref'ja said, “Though he knows nothing about this current operation. If he did, I'm sure he'd try to stop me.”

“What do you mean?” Myri asked. “Was he your... mentor?”

Aref'ja's fur rippled. “I suppose you could say that. But that isn't what I mean.”

“What *do* you mean?” Myri sensed danger behind his soft voice.

Aref'ja reached into his uniform and drew out a long, thick metal cylinder. It was only when he shifted his grip on it that Myri recognized it as a lightsaber.

“Where did you get that?” she gaped. “You're not a....”

“Of course not,” Aref'ja shook his head. “No, one of our agents recently acquired this. Didn't get what she came for, but at least she got this. This is a warning,

Miss Antilles. It's not just your Alliance intelligence band that's after us, the Jedi are too."

Arefja's long ears flattened against his skull. "The good Admiral Kre'fey was a strong believer in the Jedi. From the start of the war, he supported Jedi involvement even when the government, including his cousin, distrusted Luke Skywalker's knights. He admired their bravery, their selflessness. And he was right. If we'd worked with the Jedi billions of lives could have been saved, maybe even Coruscant itself.

"When the war ended, though, he was put to the test. The Jedi said they could end the war peacefully, and somehow convince an entire species of fanatic, death-loving warriors to lay down arms and go into voluntary exile on some magic planet called Zonoma Sekot. Any military man knows that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. But Kre'fey agreed anyway, because he trusted the Jedi, and because he wanted to avoid a mop-up action that could be as long and bloody as the whole war that came up to it. If I were in his place, I might have even made the same choice."

Arefja's lips pulled back to reveal sharp canines. "But he was wrong. One act of kindness can't civilize an entire race of savages."

Myri felt chilled. "That Vong fleet, where did they come from? What happened to Zonama Sekot? Did you..." She couldn't even finish her sentence.

Arefja shook his head. "We have no idea where Zonama Sekot is. Believe me, we've been looking. Right now, our concern is that fleet."

"How did you find it? Were they... attacking people?"

Arefja snorted. "Yes, and even if the Alliance weren't a mess right now, they'd never muster a fleet to

stop them. But I have. I have spent the better part of a decade finding allies from all parts of the galaxy, people who will help me finish what we should have started fifteen years ago.”

Myri felt herself shiver. “And what happens to me in all this? I'm your prisoner, right?”

“Prisoner?” Arefja shook his head. “You'll be kept under observation, but no, you're not our prisoner. You'll be staying here with us, to fight if you so choose.”

“And if I don't?”

“Then you can still remain, because live or die, we will need witnesses to tell the rest of the galaxy what we did here in the uncharted depths of space.”

He leaned in close, and laid a silver paw on Myri's hand. His gold eyes blazed as he said, “Myri Antilles, you are going to witness history. We are going to eradicate the Yuuzhan Vong, once and for all.”

Continue for a preview of
Star Wars: Twilight of the Jedi: The Dying Day
By Gregory O. Scott

The stunning conclusion to the saga of Omega Squad
and the Republic Commandos

The wars have reached their bloody conclusion. A horrible Empire is being born and every being in the galaxy is scrambling to find a place in the New Order.

On Mandalore, Kal Skirata is creating a safe haven for clones who have deserted the Imperial Army. He wants nothing more than to bring the men he trained to safety, especially the ones still stuck on Coruscant. His plans go awry when fugitive Jedi show up on his doorstep, and he must put aside old hatred to help Jedi and Clone alike escape the Empire.

On Belsavis, a safe haven has been created for Jedi, but the Empire is picking up its trail. The Emperor has decided to test a new weapon, and a young officer named Pellaeon has been tasked to exterminate Jedi he once fought beside. At the same time, Pellaeon chases a fugitive fleet led by A'sharad Hett, a former Jedi increasingly unsure of his place in the galaxy and the Force.

And on Coruscant, Niner and Darman, Skirata's prized sons, have been enlisted by Lord Vader to hunt down the remaining Jedi. Niner wants nothing more than escape. Darman blames the Jedi for the death of his wife, and plans to help Vader exterminate the Order- even if it means betraying his father.

When the first rays of sunlight spilled over the gentle curve of Zhar's surface, the debris drifting in its orbit gleamed like a thousand jewels. A few explosions, sparks of a dying battle, burst sporadically against the barren planet's dark night-side face. The broad gray wedge of the star destroyer *Valediction* sliced through the debris field with a sense of triumph.

Valediction was one of the first of her kind, a new *Victory*-class star destroyer fresh from the Rendilli Shipyards. Standing at the fore of his vessel's bridge, Captain Gilad Pellaeon had to marvel at the sparkling-clean deck, the bright consoles and vivid holographic tactical displays. It even smelled like a freshly waxed boot. Some people were grumbling that the newly-reformed Empire was producing brand new, top-of-the-line warships even after the Separatist threat had been defeated, but for young Captain Gilad Pellaeon, such a beautiful new vessel justified its own existence.

He heard the sound of footsteps behind him, quick and crisp, and knew to whom they belonged without having to turn his head. He said, "Report, Lieutenant."

"The Separatist flagship has been destroyed sir," Mynar Vernetet said.

"I can see that, Lieutenant. What about those two dreadnaughts that are slipping behind Zhar's second moon? Looks to me like they're trying to make a break for it."

“*Salvation* is moving to intercept. Should we assist?”

With his naked eye, he could see the *Venator*-class destroyer moving toward the moon with the hopes of cutting off the two fleeing dreadnaughts before they cut behind the moon. Once they did, they'd be able to use it as a shield until they escaped Zhar's gravity well and made the jump to hyperspace.

“Captain Hornar's got an old vessel, not fancy a pretty one like ours.” Pellaeon turned around to look his first officer in the eye and smiled tightly. “Let's lend her a hand.”

“Right away, sir.” Vernedet smiled back, and quickly relayed the order.

Valediction's engines fired and she moved forward smoothly, without a tiny jerk or lurch. Pellaeon watched as his destroyer's diamond-shaped prow plunged deeper into the debris field. *Valediction*'s forward gunners fired sporadic burst of turbolaser fire, clipping or outright destroying any large chunk of debris that could have gotten in their way.

Vernedet settled smoothly beside him. “Have you reported to Admiral Grant yet, sir?”

“Not yet. Wait until the battle's done.”

“Very good, sir. He should be pleased.”

“Assuming we finish off those last Separatists,” Pellaeon jabbed a finger at the dreadnaughts. *Salvation* was launching her remaining fighters with the hopes of catching the dreadnaughts, which were probably going to duck behind the moon before either star destroyer got a good shot with her turbolasers.

“Still, we've cleared the Seps out of the Zhar system,” Vernedet said. “The sooner we finish mop-up, the sooner we can go back home.”

Pellaeon didn't have to glance at Vernedet to see the wistful smile on his face. The two of them had known each other since naval academy. They'd been two of

the youngest and two of the most promising cadets there, and when the Clone Wars broke out they'd made a wager as to who would get command a battle cruiser first.

The intervening years had been taxing for them both, and Vernedet didn't seem to hold it against Pellaeon for getting the captain's pips on his collar first. If anything, he seemed pleased that fate had placed them on the same starship. Especially if the starship was as new, sleek, pretty, and fine-smelling as *Valediction*.

In a lower voice, Vernedet asked, "Any word from Hallena yet, Gil?"

"Not for a while," Pellaeon admitted.

It had been almost two years since he'd last heard from her. Hallena Devis had been a prized agent for Republic Intelligence, but during the war she'd become disillusioned with her government and left her position to travel with a group of schismatic Jedi. They had been close once, and it pained him to think that political divisions would tear apart of the only relationships he'd had worth the effort. He'd not heard from Hallena since before the Republic became an Empire. He had no idea what she thought about Palpatine's new government, but given her soft spot for the Jedi, it was unlikely her opinion had improved.

He hoped, even prayed, that once they finished cleaning up these stubborn Separatists, the two of them could lay down their differences and be together at last.

Assuming she was still alive at all.

"How's Aylin?" he asked at last.

"Safe and sound on Coruscant, last I heard."

"You're lucky, falling for a civilian," Pellaeon said. A little hesitantly, he added, "How *are* things on Coruscant?"

"No more Seps raining hellfire from the sky. She says people are still tense and all. Probably waiting

for the war to end.”

“You'd think it would be over by now,” Pellaeon muttered as he watched the dreadnaughts' fighter screens collide with *Salvation's* squadrons and light up the closing space between ships.

“Some people just don't know when to quit,” Vernedet nodded. “They'd be better off surrendering.”

Pellaeon wasn't entirely sure about that. He'd heard differing reports from different people about how the new government was handling Separatists and other combatants who surrendered to the Imperial fleet. Some said the prisoners were treated fairly; others said they were whisked away by unfamiliar Intel agents and never again.

He wondered how much of it had to do with the Jedi. Like many in the Republic military, he'd looked up to the Jedi as brave generals who always lead their troops from the front lines. As a naval officer instead of an army one, he hadn't had much opportunity to work directly with the during ground battles, but the ones he *had* worked with had proven admirable. It still seemed hard to believe that the Jedi could have engineered the entire war as the set-up for a coup against the elected Chancellor Palpatine, but the evidence he'd seen, including recordings from inside Palpatine's office during Mace Windu's attempt on his life, were hard to counter.

He's mulled it over in his mind again and again, and the best conclusion he could think of was that the Jedi leadership had instigated the coup without the knowledge of their soldiers on the ground. In that light, Palpatine's whole-scale purge of the Jedi Order seemed more than a little excessive. At the same time, Jedi were super-powered beings beyond the understanding of mortals like Pellaeon or Vernedet, and there was no way to tell which could be trusted and which could not. Palpatine's methods, ugly as

they might have been, were the safest way to protect the galaxy from another Jedi coup attempt.

Still, the thought of needless slaughter made him sick. He simply wanted the war to end so he could see Hallena again.

Up ahead, the dreadnaughts were already ducking behind the moon. *Salvation* was adjusting heading to pursue around the moon's planet-side rim while her fighters kept harassing the fleeing ships.

"Sir," Vernedet cleared his throat, "What are your orders?"

"Launch all remaining fighter squads. Plot a course that takes us around the moon's outer edge. We'll see if we can cut them off."

"Very good, sir," Vernedet gave a crisp, smart salute and walked back toward the crew pit to relay order.

A moment later, a flight of ARC-170 starfighters shot out from beneath *Valediction's* pointed nose. On their tails rode a full squadron of V-wings.

Pellaeon's mouth formed a tight, straight line as his vessel shifted course slightly. *Salvation* was rounding the moon as fast as she could. All that was left to do was wait.

As he rolled his Z-95 headhunter behind close behind a jinking ARC-170 starfighter and dropped his targeting reticule on its flaring red exhaust posts, A'sharad Hett hesitated before before firing. He wasn't sure if it was because he'd once flown beside ships like these for years, or because some part of his Jedi training still shirked at taking life.

Whatever it was, it only bothered him for a second. He squeezed the trigger and a single photon torpedo lanced out. It impacted on the ARC fighter's aft shields and exploded. The force of detonation tore through the engines, ignited the thrust fuel storage, and turned the entire ship into a tumbling fireball.

Hett pulled up sharply and veered back toward the two dreadnaughts. There were plenty more enemy fighters left to kill.

As he angled toward *Minotaur* and *Griffin*, a transmission scratched over his helmet's comlink. "All ships, we are preparing to withdrawal. Repeat, we are preparing to jump to hyperspace. Return to your decks. Repeat, return to your decks!"

Hett glanced at his cockpit's tactical display. It was still another three minutes before either dreadnaught cleared the gravity well, and it would take less than two for the *Venator*-class destroyer to round the moon and begin pounding *Minotaur*'s fragile aft section with her turbolasers.

He flicked his comlink to a secure channel and called, "Command, this is Twin Suns Lead. Do you copy?"

After a second, a man's voice responded. "We copy, Twin Lead. Go ahead."

"Yvolton, put Syne on," Hett snapped. He didn't have time to go with intermediaries. The other fighters were already starting to return to the dreadnaughts, though his own squadron was holding back and awaiting his orders.

"One second." He could hear Yvolton's hesitation. "Okay, here she is."

A harsh, cold female voice snapped, "What is it, Twin Lead?"

"*Minotaur*'s going to need her fighter screen. Let us stay in the air."

"Negative, Lead. Once we clear the grav well we're gone, whether you're on board or not."

"If I get left it's my choice."

"You can't handle it alone, A'sharad. Get back to base, *now*!"

"Listen, just give us—"

"Wait—" and suddenly the line cut off.

Hett banked his fighter gently toward *Griffin*. Syne's flagship was in better shape than *Minotaur*, but enemy fighters were still buzzing around her craft like gnats.

"Lead, I'm picking up bombers headed toward *Minotaur*," Twin Suns Three reported.

"Damn," Hett snarled. "Come on, we'll pick them off."

"We've got less than two minutes to get back to the barn," Twin Five reminded him.

"More time than *Minotaur* has if we don't get those bombers. Twin Suns, follow me."

He pointed his Headhunter's nose toward the dreadnaught and kicked his engines at full thrust. A few V-wing fighters danced to get out of his way as he charged forward. He squinted into the blackness of space as he approached *Minotaur*, searching for whatever ships might be trying to take her down. He wasn't even sure what kind of bombers the Empire was using nowadays; they were rolling out new ships and soldiers at an astounding rate even though the Clone Wars had technically been won for more than a year,

He didn't see the ships, but he did see the flare of over a dozen missiles as they arced toward *Minotaur's* rear engine section. Profanities rippled over the Twin Suns group comm as *Minotaur's* shields shuddered and collapsed. With impeccable timing, the star destroyer behind it began to rain down volleys of turbolaser fire.

"All fighters, retreat to *Griffin*!" Yolvton said over the broadcast channel. "Repeat, all ships fall back to *Griffin*! We jump in eighty seconds!"

"Boss," Twin Suns Five said, "The other destroyer just rounded the moon."

This time it was Hett who swore. He checked his scanners and saw the *Victory*-class destroyer breaking past the moon's outer ecliptic. It began firing on

Griffin, and washes of green energy flashed across her forward shields.

Griffin could probably hold until she escaped the gravity well. *Minotaur* didn't stand a chance. Even now, explosive ruptures were tearing through her engine section. Escape pods were shooting out of her hull, probably to be captured by Imperial clean-up crews.

It was a fight he couldn't win. Those were lives he couldn't save. He wanted to scream and pound at the universe itself, because he knew now that everything had always been thus from the very beginning.

"Twin Suns, fall back!" He pointed his nose toward *Griffin* and jammed the engines. The rest of his squad followed. They pulled into a tight arrowhead formation and whipped past ARC and V-wing fighters without even slowing down. There was a burst of static over his headset as a stray torpedo caught Twin Suns Five and burned him out; worse, he could feel yet another life wink out in the Force, a life that has been his to leave, a life he'd sworn to protect.

For a second, he wondered whether it was worth it to keep flying at all. In this brave new galaxy there was only way a Jedi's life could end. Deep down, he'd known that since his father's death on Tatooine twenty years ago.

Then a voice came over his headset, Syne's herself: "All ships, you have thirty seconds! Land *now*!"

Griffin was coming up fast but he didn't know if they'd made it. The dreadnaught still had the ventral shields down so fighters could slip into her landing bay, but her forward shields were still light by the the vicstar's fire.

He dipped his fighter low, aimed for the bright open docking port. It grew bigger, bigger, bigger, until it swallowed his Headhunter in its brightness.

"Ten seconds!" Someone's voice- Yvolton's- buzzed

in his headset as he fired his repulsors and tried to find a spot on the broad, crowded deck.

He dropped his landing struts. His vessel shuddered as he touched down.

Then everything lurched forward, and *Griffin* fell into hyperspace.

Hett sat in his cockpit without getting out. He took off his battered white helmet with shaking hands. Right before they'd jumped he had felt it: the destruction of *Minotaur* and the loss of tens of thousands of lives. One second they had been fires that had burned bravely beside his own. Then they'd winked out and been nothing at all. The loss shuddered through his body and brought a tear to one eye.

Still clasping his helmet in his hands, he screamed inside the sound-proof bubble of his cockpit. Then his throat had gone raw, he opened the cockpit and wandered out among the survivors.

Valediction's bridge was eerily quiet. Every crewman seemed to be watching the empty space where the last dreadnaught had just been.

Pellaeon cleared his throat and shouted, "All crew, get to work! Repeat, *get to work!* Comm, ask *Salvation* what kind of assistance she needs! Tactical, send out rescue crew to pick up our EV pilots!"

The bridge echoed with a chorus of 'yes, sirs'. When everyone was finally back in motion, Pellaeon sighed and turned to face the forward viewport. The first dreadnaught's broken corpse still smoldered and he wondered how long it would take for all the oxygen inside the ship to burn out. He wondered how long it would take for the crew to all die.

Though a part of him felt sorry for them, another part cursed them for dragging on this war as long as they had. If the damned fools would just stop fighting, they

could all lay down arms and go back to their families. They could all *find* the families they wanted to go back do.

Vernedet appeared beside him. "Do you want to comm Admiral Grant or should I, sir?"

Pellaeon hadn't even thought of that. Reporting failure to your superior officers was one of the worse parts of command. He suddenly longed to be a grunt ensign who never had to take responsibility for anything

"I'll handle it, Mynar," Pellaeon clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "They're going to have us keep chasing them. You can bet on it."

"It does sound likely."

"Then we'd best clean up as fast as we can and get ready to pursue."

He turned and started across the bridge to the private command salon. He had a feeling he'd want to plead for Grant's mercy far from the prying eyes of his crew. As he walked across the clean metal deck, he decided that this shiny new warship had a lot of war left to fight.

As did they all.

The scene aboard *Griffin* after the battle was cramped and frantic. The hangar bay was full of fighters recovered from the other dreadnaught, while the hallways were packed with officers moving about, coordinating post-battle damage assessment and trying to take stock of how many personnel had been saved from *Minotaur*.

A'sharad Hett was able to cut through the crowd. He was a large man, tall and broad-shouldered. The dark tattoos that lined his tanned face gave him a striking appearance, and the twin lightsabers dangling from his belt instantly grabbed beings' attention.

Those things were enough to identify him to every

being on board *Griffin*, and more than his appearance, it was that he *was* that made people shuffle aside in deference, fear, and caution. Just a year ago, he had been their enemy, and neither he nor they could ever forget that.

For months he had served the Republic in battling the fiercely independent settlers on the planet Bavinyar. They had allied themselves with the Techno Union, Banking Clan, and Trade Federation separatists less because they trusted Lord Dooku and his minions, and more because the rugged, stubborn people had fled Republic control and established their own colony world a hundred years back and were loathe to surrender an inch to Coruscant.

Then Republic had become Empire, the separatist leaders had been slaughtered, and the New Order suddenly had the resources to subdue Bavinyar. Right now, Jereveth Syne's *Griffin* was the last remaining capital ship of the Bavinyar Defense Fleet, and though the planet was firmly under its heel, the Empire was determined the stamp out the final renegades.

As for A'sharad Hett, he might have been the last Jedi in the universe. It made for a strange alliance, but these were strange dark times.

When he reached the bridge he looked around for Syne. She was a small woman but she had a unique capacity to make any room gravitate around her. He did not see her, but a man caught his eyes from across the bridge and hurried over to him.

Avit Madrisk was a short, slim man with a trim brown beard. He gave Hett a curt nod and said, "The captain isn't here now. She left the bridge immediately after the battle."

"Is everything under control here?" Hett glanced around the bridge. The crew seemed stressed but no longer panicked; clean-up from such an exhausting battle would take time, but at least they no longer had

the threat of death looming over them.

"I can handle it," Madrisk said. "I would... suggest you go see to the captain."

Hett nodded. Many of Syne's people were uncomfortable with Hett's friendship with their captain. Hett wasn't entirely comfortable with it himself. *Griffin's* first officer, at least, seemed to have no such qualms, and for that Hett was grateful.

Right now he needed any confidence he could get.

He gave Madrisk curt thanks, then turned around the left the bridge. He could feel the muted relief his absence brought to the bridge, and he did not blame them.

Hett made his way down into the private crew quarters. These decks were shockingly quiet compared to the ones above, and he went down three hallways to Syne's cabin without encountering a soul.

When he got to her door he knocked three times and waited.

Eventually a voice said, "Enter."

He stepped through the door. The captain's quarters were bare-walled and cramped, with room only for a bed half-receded into the wall and table with two chairs. There were no windows. Only a single overhead light cast illumination on the woman standing in the middle of the room. Long, dark hair spilled over her shoulder and framed a pale round face. The brown Bavinyar Defense Force uniform she still wore was unbuttoned to the waist. Her face, pretty but stuck in a habitual scowl, looked haggard and her dark eyes were bloodshot.

The door closed behind Hett. He didn't step closer. He clenched hands into fists at his side and said, "I'm sorry, Captain. There wasn't anything to be done for *Minotaur*."

"Of course not," Syne sneered. "The Imps had us out-manned and out-gunned. Their warships are brand

new and ours are breaking down. *Minotaur* was doomed. That's why I told you to fall back."

"I did fall back."

"Not when I told you to." She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him.

"I thought I might have been able to save *Minotaur*."

"You couldn't. I knew you couldn't."

"I thought-" He stopped, sighed, shook his head. "I wanted to save *lives*, dammit. I had to try."

"Of course. Saving people is your purpose. You are the *Jedi*," she said the word like a curse. All the Bavinyari did. To them, the Jedi had been symbols of the Republic they'd long sought to escape. In the beginning, Syne's cold pragmatism had been all that prevented the other Bavinyari from lynching their Jedi prisoner or handing him over to the Empire.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"I don't know." She turned her head down. Shadows fell over her face and she seemed suddenly tired.

"We can meet up with the other ships."

"Of course." She laughed bitterly. "A handful of frigates and corvettes will help us *greatly* the next time the Empire catches up to us."

"You could surrender." He took a step forward.

"Never," she looked up at him. "We are the last hold-outs of Bavinyar. When they have us they will make an example of us."

"Perhaps." He took another step, putting her in arm's reach. She tilted her head to look up at him but didn't flinch.

She knew what he implied. She was no fool. She could offer the Empire a gift-wrapped Jedi in exchange for amnesty. Any smart resistance leader in her position would be considering it. Half of *Griffin's* crew was probably wondering why she hadn't done it already.

“No,” she said, answering his unspoken question.

“Why?”

“You *know* why, you damn idiot.”

“If you want to save lives-”

“Only a fool would trust the Emperor to honor his deals. He's broken too many promises to count already. That's what I've told Avit, and Andrein, and Sajin, and all the others.”

“Have all of them asked?”

“No,” she exhaled. “They are too... loyal to question my judgment. But I see it in their eyes.”

She saw her own doubts reflected in them, most likely.

“It is still an option.” Hett took another step closer.

“Never. Surrender is death.”

It was, thought Hett, the only thing they really had in common. But it was enough.

He reached out and placed a hand on either shoulder. They felt small and bony under his large hands. She tilted her head back, spilling harsh pale light on her pale face. When he couldn't restrain himself any longer he bent low and kissed her on thin, dry lips.

They tumbled and wrestled their way over to the bunk. Pent-up energy and frustration from the battle finally found outlet. Hett tossed her onto the bunk and into shadow, then quickly dove down after her onto a brittle bed.

Passion was one of the things he'd been taught to avoid as a Jedi. It had always been hard for him, just as it had been hard for his father, who had fled the Jedi Order to become a Tusken tribesman on Tatooine. A'sharad had been a teenager when he saw his father and his old Tusken family die; it was a grief he'd never truly conquered. The loss of his adopted Jedi family had been almost as hard.

Now the Jedi were gone, and so were there rules. It was a strange thing, no longer having to hide from

yourself. Sometimes he felt like a confused child, and other times he felt old with bitter wisdom. Right now he fell into the dark with Syne, desperate and confused but without hesitation.

A'Sharad Hett was no longer a Jedi. The Jedi were extinct, and rather than being the last of an old race he now was his own creature, unique and alone. Perhaps he always had been. He'd come to understand that in the long, awful year since the fall of the Republic and the birth of a horrible New Order. He didn't know what he was now, and knew less what he would become in the future, but he was going to find out.

Read on for a preview of
Star Wars: Sword of the Jedi II: Revenge

by Gregory O. Scott

Friends, foes, and uneasy allies all plunge into the Unknown Regions. Their quarry: The living planet Zonama Sekot, home of the Yuuzhan Vong!

Somewhere in the Unknown Regions, a war is raging. A ragtag fleet ships, with a commander hungry for revenge, is seeking its quarry: The Yuuzhan Vong, who ravaged the galaxy only to surrender and be exiled to the living planet of Zonama Sekot fifteen years before. A Yuuzhan Vong fleet has emerged to combat the renegades, and their battle threatens to tear the galaxy apart.

Now a third party voyages into the Unknown Regions in the hopes of tracking down both fleets, as well as the mysterious Zonama Sekot. This task force is a fragile coalition of Alliance, Imperial, and Chiss vessels, commanded by a man who has served all three sides: Jagged Fel. With him are some of his generation's greatest heroes: Jaina Solo, Ben Skywalker, Tahiri Veila, Syal Antilles, and the men and women of Wraith Squadron.

Unknown to them, other factors are at play. Deposed dictator Natasi Daala has learned of the conflict and is mustering a fleet of her own, with the help of the galaxy's most infamous bounty hunter. Syal's sister Myri, now held captive by the renegade fleet, tries to convince its commander to lay down arms. But most important of all, an army of Sith lurk somewhere in the shadows, waiting for a moment of weakness to strike.

Starlines became stars and the drop ship jerked violently as Yaga Minor's gravity well tore it out of hyperspace. The soldiers within, lined shoulder-to-armored-shoulder with their backs against the drop ship's two long walls, jostled in their crash webbing as their vessel continued to careen forward toward its target. It fell so fast toward the Star Destroyer's gray bulk that the defense platforms failed to track it. Even as it approached the vessel's aft, strangely serene without its three blue ion engines aglow, the drop ship barely slowed. The pilot nudged the ship a little, adjusting telemetry so it shot like an arrow toward the arced spine that connected bridge and conning tower to the Destroyer's edge-shaped bulk. Another nudge, then a third. The Destroyer's garbage disposal chute filled the viewport.

Five, four, three, two, one.

Drop.

Retro-burners roared to life, not enough to keep them from smashing through the Destroyer's back door, but enough so that they merely crashed inside the garage processor instead of exploding on impact. The force was still enough to shake, rattle, and nearly knock out the soldiers inside, still clinging to their crash webbing.

Then the drop ship's side door swung open. Air howled as the vacuum sucked it up in a seconds. Then the soldiers unhooked their crash webbing and grabbed their weapons.

Boba Fett clasped the T-77 rifle in one hand, hoisted it high, and shouted, “*Oya!*”

“*Oya!*” his soldiers repeated, and two dozen Mandalorians charged down the throat of the *Chimera*.

This wasn't the first time Fett had hijacked a Star Destroyer. Some of the same people who took *Bloodfin* four years ago were with him, now, and unlike the heavily-guarded flagship at the Battle of Fondor, this one was a retired museum piece, in the process of being decommissioned. Stealing *Chimera* would be easy.

Probably, anyway.

Enough of *Chimera*'s systems were still on line that emergency blast doors began to groan into motion in order to seal off the decompressed areas from the rest of the ship. Ten meters above the *Mandos'* heads, two massive slabs of durasteel and ferocrete were grinding toward one another to seal off the garbage disposal.

Lucky for them, Mandalorians were not ordinary raiders.

Fett took the lead and fired his jet pack. Its torrent of flame threw him upward, easily slipping between the closing doors. The other *Mandos* that had jet packs did the same, while those that did not latched on to their comrades or fired grappling hooks that dug into the sides of the chute and pulled them up through the closing maw. When the door finally sealed and the compartment began to re-pressurize, every soldier was safely inside and double-checking his or her armaments.

“Don't dawdle,” Fett told them. “Don't waste the element of surprise while you've still got it.”

“No problem, *Bob'ika*,” a gruff but enthusiastic man's voice scratched in Fett's helmet.

“Carid, take your team. Secure the hangar.”

“Copy. Have fun on the bridge.”

Fett didn't bother to respond. Nine Mandalorians followed the lead the big broad-shouldered soldier in

dark purple armor and charged down the nearest hallway.

Fett threw his gaze over the fifteen remaining. They were armor of all sizes and colors, but all shared the T-shaped visor that marked them as what they were to the eyes of the rest of the galaxy.

“Well, are we ready?” asked the lone Mandalorian wearing the battered helmet of a ARC Commando from the Clone Wars.

He said, “Ready when you are, old barve.”

Mereel threw back his head and laughed at that, which was good, because the crazy old bat might just as likely have shot Fett's head off.

“Come on,” said another commando, this one wearing colorful and miss-matched armor pieced together from over a dozen different suits worn by his fallen family. “Let's go.”

They all followed Venku, of course. Not for the first time, Fett wondered why they hadn't just made him *Mand'alor*. Having a Jedi as a mother might have hurt his chances in theory, but at the end of the day *Mandos* cared less about bloodlines than deeds. That was what Venku always said, pridefully. He was the one who wanted to reform Mandalorian society. Boba Fett just wanted, well....

He pushed *want* out of his head. He'd been hired to do a job and he was going to do it. That was why he was the best bounty hunter in the galaxy.

“Oya!” Fett shouted. The fifteen commandos echoed his shout, and they charged forward.

Carid had a lot of ground to cover before his team reached the hangar bay, but the starting point of the garbage chute was already at the base of the command tower where the bridge was located.

Alarm sirens finally started to go off while they ascended the main ventilation shaft that carried oxygen to the command tower. It was barely wide enough to fit

two people shoulder-to-shoulder, which meant they had to climb slowly up the maintenance ladders. One the plus side, they were scrambling all security cameras and apparently the Imperials hadn't figured out where they were yet.

When they got to the bridge level things changed quickly. They were met by at least two squadrons of stormtroopers raining lasterfire down the corridor. Fett heard a cry over his headset and saw on of his men go down.

"Jaing's hit!" Mereel said. "Got him in the leg!"

"I can hold it..." Mereel's clone brother groaned. "*Shab*, this hurts..."

"Help me take him out!" said another old man.

Fett waved his men forward as Mereel and another soldier in red armor dragged the wounded old clone out of the line of fire.

Good, Fett thought. The less he had to shepard around crazy old Skirata clones, the better he'd be. He still remembered those crazy barves from when he was a kid on Kamino, and he never expected them to come back into his life again. It was just one of many strange things about getting old.

"Everybody down!" a voice shouted. "Fire in the hole!"

Fett hit the ground just as a pair of glop grenades arced over his head. The stormtroopers saw it, rushed for cover, but were stuck in the middle of the massive concussion blast.

"No more grenades!" Fett shouted over the headset comlink that connected his team. "She wants this ship *intact*, remember?"

"Sorry, *Mand'ador*," said the man getting to his feet behind Fett. "Couldn't resist."

Fett rolled on to his back to see a *Mando* in black and orange striped. Jaing Skirata's grandson Mird extended a

hand. Fett wanted to hop to his feet and continue the charge, but, well, he wasn't getting any younger, so he took Mird's offered hand and let himself be pulled up.

Up ahead, four *Mandos* were clearing the hallway and gunning down the remaining stormtroopers. At the end of the corridor, Fett could see the heavy blast doors clamped tight around the entrance to the bridge. Odds were good that there were other layers to the armored door that they couldn't see. It would take more than two grenades to blow through those, probably more than two dozen. They'd have to destroy the entire hallway before they got through those.

Thankfully, they had another option.

"Venku!" he called. "We need a little of your magic."

The Mandalorian in multi-colored, piecemeal armor stepped up from the back of the group. As he passed Fett he said, "No problem, *Mand'ador*." He sounded only a little surly.

Venku was flanked by two soldiers in blue armor as he approached the blast doors. Fett stood a safe distance behind, ostensibly to provide cover fire if they needed it but also to avoid getting caught in whatever traps *Chimera* might have in store.

When Venku got close enough, small hatches on either side of the blast doors slid open and two repeating blaster emplacements dropped out. Venku's guards were ready; they blasted both emplacements to smoke and melted metal before either could get off a shot.

Venku stepped calmly up to the blast doors, unhooked two lightsabers from his belt, and ignited each. All of the other *Mandos*, even Fett, stood and watched in silent awe as Venku stabbed both humming blue blades into the doors. Metal burned, twisted, hissed, and growled as Venku slowly moved the blades together toward the locking mechanism at the center of the doors. Molten durasteel sizzled and dripped and pooled on the floor.

He moved the blades closer together, inch by inch, until finally they sliced through the central lock.

Venku pulled the blast doors out. There was a loud, deep groaning noise, a noise that shook the entire deck and rattled Fett inside his armor as the blast doors slid open.

Fifteen Mandalorians charged into the bridge. Venku went in first, catching and reflecting laser blasts with the constant blue whirl of his lightsabers. There were only a few stormtroopers on the deck, and they were dispatched before Fett could even get inside. By that point, the rest of the crew had thrown up their hands in surrender.

“What a bunch of *hun'uune*,” a gravelly laugh echoed in Fett's ear. He looked over his shoulder to see Mereel Skirata in his scarred ARC Commando helmet brining up the rear.

He didn't bother to ask about Jaing. He said, “Take positions! Let's get this boat sailing before the Imps try and stop us!”

“Yessir, *Mand'ador*!” Mird said eagerly. He skirted over to the navigation and promptly began to threaten the cowering crew. Mereel dropped into the crew pit and stalked over to the gunnery station.

One of the *Mandos* in blue surveyed the tactical station. She reported, “All clear, *Mand'ador*. No interceptors incoming.”

“Get those thrusters going,” Fett said. “I want to clear the grav well and get out of hyperspace as soon as possible.”

“Already working on it,” Mird reported.

Venku was over at the communications station, working the controls himself instead of just threatening to shoot the crew. He reported, “Looks like Carid's team as the hangar area secure.”

“Good. Can we cut oxygen to the rest of them ship?”

"How much?" Bess Skirata asked from the tactical station.

"Enough to put 'em to sleep but not kill 'em."

"Already working on it."

Fett strut forward across the center aisle to the bridge's forward viewports. He saw the pale bulk of *Chimera* stretching out for almost a mile before him like a spearhead stabbing at the stars. He was not generally a romantic man, but he thought he understood a little of what being here must have felt like for past Imperial luminaries like Thrawn, Daala, and Pellaeon.

The ship shuddered slightly at the stars began to move. Mird reported, "Thrusters are go. We should clear the gravity well in less than a minute."

"Imps finally woke up," Mereel said from the gunnery station. "Couple snubfighters patrols and a Lancer coming to investigate. Won't get here in time."

"Is that hyperdive online?"

"On line and warming up," said Mird.

"Tell me when we're ready to jump. How's that oxygen going, Bess?"

"They're starting to drop, *Mand'alor*. Everywhere but the bridge and the hangar."

"Good. Just remember, don't kill them."

"We're out of the gravity well," Mird reported.

"Do you have to coordinates?"

"Already plugged 'em in."

Fett inhaled deeply and said, "Jump."

Starlines stretched out into a blue-white blur, and it literally took his breath away.

The stars returned almost as quickly as they'd left. Fett stood at the front viewport, scanning the cosmos like a domineering sea captain of old. *Chimera's* staff, Imperial and Mandalorian alike, stared anxiously up at him from the crew pit.

"Location," Fett said. His voice was firm, steady, and lethally quiet.

“Right where we're supposed to be,” Mird Skirata called from the navigation console as he peered over the shoulder of the cowering officer.

“Where is she?” Mereel called from the gunnery station.

“Keep your helmet on, old man,” Fett growled. “Comm, broadcast the signal, like I told you.”

“Signal's going out,” Venku reported calmly.

Fett didn't have to turn around to see Mereel slowly coming up to the center aisle. His gloved fists were angrily balled and he looked like he was ready to throttle his *Mand'alor* if their contact didn't show in the next thirty seconds.

With a tiny motion, barely visible, Fett flicked his helmet's comlink onto Mereel's private channel. “Calm your *shebs*. How's Jaing?”

Mereel stopped in his tracks, taken aback and suddenly awkward. He flipped his link to Fett's private channel and said, “Took a shot in the leg. Gotab took him to the med bay.”

“He'll be fine,” Fett said. “He's a tough old bird, just like you.”

Mereel seemed slightly mollified. He hung in the middle of the aisle and didn't try to get closer to Fett. The Imperial crew had no idea what was going on and stared at the Mandalorian overhead with fear and confusion. The actual *Mandos* down with them hadn't heard the conversation but they probably figured the gist of it.

Fett wondered why he'd agreed to take these crazy old clones and clone-spawn with him, and not for the first time. And, not for the first time, he immediately knew why.

They had no home to go to either. Nobody with Jango Fett's genes did. So they were stuck with him and he was stuck with them unless his client had any new help to give.

And right on cue, a gray wedge dropped out of hyperspace three kilometers off *Chimera's* bow. It was another, even older destroyer, *Venator*-class. Leave it to Daala to dig up more old fossils. Fett wondered whether the clones were feeling nostalgic as he flipped his comm back to broadcast mode.

"Incoming transmission," Venku reported.

"Put her on." Fett said as he watched the *Venator* drift slowly closer.

The overhead comlink crackled to life. Even over static the voice was smooth, seductive, lethal, and instantly recognizable.

"*Chimera*, this is *Valor*. Congratulations, Captain Fett. You're as impressive as always."

"No need to flatter, Admiral Daala," he said. "We're just doing our job."

"As as always, you do it well," Daala purred. "Permission to transfer my flag aboard, Captain?"

"Permission granted. And I'm no captain."

"You are until I get there," Daala said. She sounded like an excited schoolgirl. "I'll see you in the landing bay, Captain."

"Acknowledged," Fett said, and signaled Venku to close the link. He walked down the center aisle of the bridge, nimbly avoiding Mereel as he stayed planted on the floorboards. He went right to the turbolift and rode it all the way down.

When he arrived at the landing desk five minutes later, Daala's shuttle, a bulky *Gamma*-class assault ship, was settling down. The great bay of the *Chimera* was devoid of people save a few Imperial technicians and four Mandos. They stood in front of the shuttle but not at attention. Fett went right up to the big, bulky one in dark gray armor and said, "Report."

"Situation's nice and rosy, *Mand'ador*." You could hear Baltan Carid's grin without seeing it. "Two

casualties, both being tended to in sick bay. They'll be fine."

"Gotab?"

"And a couple Imp medics we wrestled up. We didn't even have to ask. Wonders what the sight of *Mando* helmet can do to a man."

"Good," Fett grunted as he watched the shuttle's landing ramp extend. "Mereel would kill me if Jaing died."

"He'd try, you mean," Carid said. Probably still grinning.

"Kriffing Skiratas," Fett shook his head.

"Family is tricky," Carid said.

A couple crazy old Jango Fett clones and their kids and grandkids weren't his family. Boba Fett only had one person in his family and she hadn't said three words to him in the past four years. He was about to tell Carid that- just to get him to shut up- when four sets of white stormtrooper boots descended the ramp.

The stormies had their E-11 rifles raised, but the Mandos stayed where they were, making as show of being unimpressed. Fett said, "Where are you, Admiral? I don't have all that."

He heard a soft chuckle and watched a pair of polished black boots come down the ramp. Somehow, Daala had gotten herself a starched white uniform, and while she didn't have the gold epaulets or rank badge of the Grand Admiral, she was clearly trying to evoke one. Combined with the steely color of her hair, tied in a long braid down her back, it made the old woman look fairly luminous.

"Admiral," Fett titled his head. "Nice outfit."

Daala chuckled. "And you, Captain Fett, haven't changed a bit. As lethal and capable as ever."

"We both age gracefully," Fett said, though he didn't know if it was true any more. Exile from a home he'd never called home did strange things.

Carid cleared his throat. "You two gonna flirt or are we gonna get paid?"

Daala might have taken offense at that in other circumstances, but right now she seemed positively joyous at having the *Chimera* again. She kept her eyes on Fett and said, "You'll get your credits, but I think you'd really be more interested in my next job offer."

"I'm willing to listen," Fett said. In truth, he was more than willing. In her request to take the *Chimera*, Daala had teased at a greater mission, and the possibility she could help him with the problem that had been ailing him for the past four years.

"Let's find somewhere private to talk," Daala said.

"That can be arranged."

The triumphant smile on Daala's face wilted to the serve line Fett was more used to seeing. "There is one other person who should be joining us."

She snapped her fingers, and another set of boots clambered down the ramp. Fett knew who it would be even before he saw the man's face. His throat filled with bile but he didn't raise his weapon or show his anger. Carid, on the other hand, raised and leveled his rifle, stopping Moff Drikl Lecersen as he stood on the edge of the ramp.

"Put it down, Carid," Fett said.

"Is this slimy *hut'uun* our reward?" Carid asked. "Cause we got a bunch of guys on this ship who would love to tear you apart."

Lecersen did his best to hide his panic, but his best was still far short of successful. Fett's anger mixed with satisfaction at seeing him squirm. He looked at Daala and saw a tiny smirk on her face.

"You don't want to shoot me," Lecersen said firmly. "I'm the one who can give you what you want."

"Do you have an antidote to the nanokiller?" Fett asked.

Carid still had his gun on Lecersen and it was making him nervous. The Moff said, "I promise I will use all my resources to create one if you assist us on this one last mission."

"So you *don't* have one." Fett looked at Daala. "You'll have to do better than that. I already got the specs on the virus from some of his scientists at Hagamoor-3. The scientists who created the weapon. They're *dead*."

"They were part of a team," Lecersen insisted. "There are others who can complete their work. We can solve this problem for you, Mr. Fett. I guarantee it."

Fett snorted. "Still not impressed. If this is the best you can offer, Admiral, well, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to risk the lives of my men for the promises of some slimy sack of *osik*." He'd been picking up Mando words bit by bit, mostly the swears. Warrior cultures were always good with swears.

The smile was long gone from Daala's face. She stared straight at Fett and said, "The Yuuzhan Vong are back. And we need your help to stop them."

Fett stared. Carid, shocked, let his weapon fall to his side. Fett could barely hear the warrior mutter, "Oh, *osik*!"

